

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

M A G A Z I N E

MAY 1998

WINTER MISCHIEF

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the bed and
mattresses creaking.
He was helpless.

BY DICK GREEN



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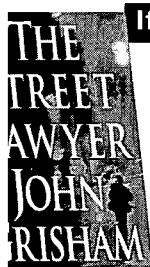
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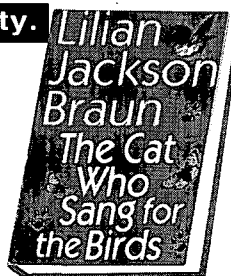
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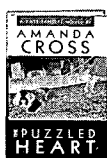
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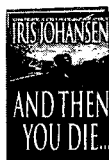
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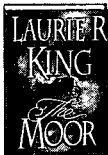
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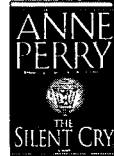
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Dick Green, author of our cover story "Winter Mischief," tells a tale of a hospital patient confronted with terrors unrelated to his health. Green has had some experience with the health-related kind, however. "An athletic accident in 1980 caused blindness for a few years and stopped my writing. Surgery restored it in the mid-eighties. . . . Four years ago . . . a new surgery developed at Johns Hopkins Wilmer Eye Clinic restored my sight to 20/20." Author of three novels published by Zebra in the seventies, two other published short stories (neither a mystery), and numerous articles and book reviews for newspapers and business magazines (his field was casualty insurance), he earned college money as a professional puppeteer, conducts a year-round writing workshop, once met and talked with John

Dickson Carr and Leslie Ford. A Marylander, he says, "My heart belongs to Maryland's Eastern Shore, and all my stories center there or nearby in Baltimore (except 'Winter Mischief')."

Our other new (to us) writer in this issue is Elaine Stirling, author of "La Carolina." She lives in Ontario but "I grew up traveling, with Dad as a geologist. Attended kindergarten in Mexico, high school in Chile. . . . With Finnish as mother tongue, Spanish as adopted language, the mysteries of communication have always intrigued me. In 1989 a profound . . . well, mystical experience opened new means of communication, and I spent the next few years doing past-life readings." "La Carolina" comes from that experience. She has written ten novels for Harlequin; the first won a Romance Writers of America Golden Heart award in 1985.

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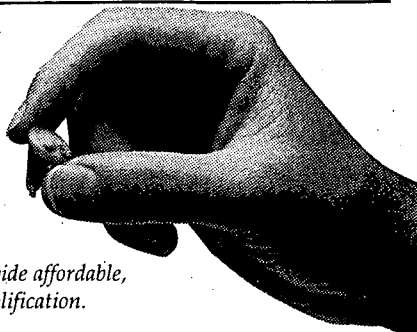
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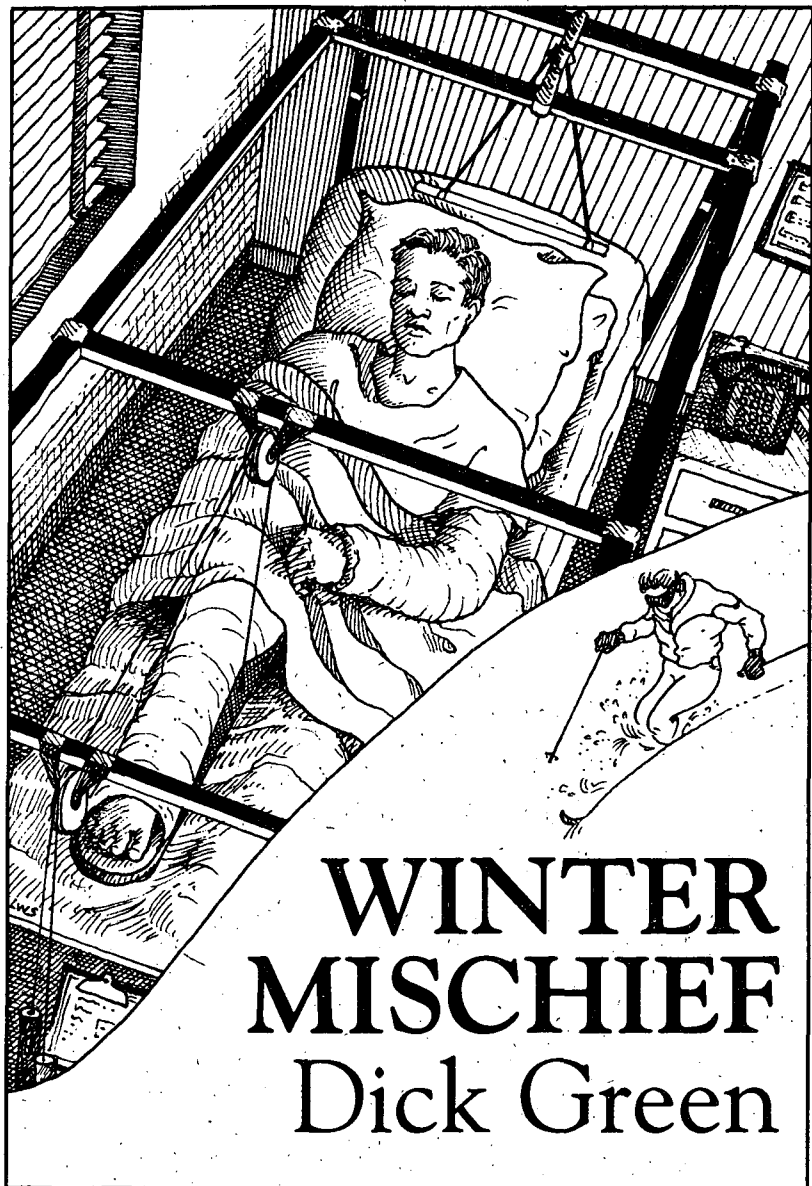


Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/98

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When Vivian appeared in the doorway to his private room, he felt his face spread with a smile. To return her kiss, he moved as much as he dared against the grip of ropes and pulleys holding his right leg aloft and the weight of the cast on his left arm. What a godsend to see her. Since yesterday afternoon on the slopes he'd been bounced on a stretcher, laid out on a table beneath glaring lights, jolted by pain, wrapped and plastered in bandages like something inside an Egyptian sarcophagus, pricked by needles, and robbed of whatever remnants of modesty a thirty-two-year-old bachelor might retain. And watched. Watched, during the middle of the night by a figure silhouetted against light from the hall.

"Poor thing," Vivian said, eyeing him and shedding her heavy coat. "You're really a sight. You looked so professional yesterday in your new sweater. But you *would* try cha chas and christies and stem turns."

"You did circles around me." He sank back against pillows. "I used to be pretty good."

"Don't try planting guilt, Chris. Where did I see the brochure picturing powdery trails and nights of revelry? On *whose* coffee table?"

"Mailing lists be damned," he grumbled.

She unwrapped a bouquet of spring flowers and swished them beneath his nose. While he sneezed, she pushed the call button. He tensed against jagged points of pain and retrieved the ball of paper that had slipped from his right hand and rolled across the blanket.

A young orderly appeared, introducing himself as Norman.

"My God! I thought I was in a nunnery," Chris said. "You're the first man I've seen."

"You just don't remember, Mr. Cooper. Dr. Pritchard set your arm and leg last night." Norman winked at Vivian. "Nurses and aides are lined up and fighting to come in here."

"The price of going with a hunk," Vivian said. She was unzipping a case containing a portable typewriter. She had used his keys to open the convertible's trunk, where she'd stored it before they left D.C. On the way to the hospital she'd purchased paper and envelopes. She placed the typewriter on the table provided for meal trays. It was designed to swing across the bed for the patient's convenience.

After Norman left to find a container for flowers, Vivian wondered aloud whether or not the ball of paper was Chris's first note from a nurse.

"It's from Norman. We're running away at midnight."

"He did give you an odd look,"

she countered. "Didn't you notice? As if he expected you to say something?"

He rolled his head, stared at snowy landscape beyond Venetian blinds. Oh Lord! Why hadn't he thrown away the brochure before Vivian noticed it? Four years ago there were photographs in the local newspapers and TV coverage. In rural areas like this, perhaps there weren't enough distractions to push aside memories of tragedy. Or murder. That's what some people termed it.

He wanted to climb out of this bed with its pulleys and buttons and contraptions. Walk away with Vivian before she walked away from him. A week on Sugar Mountain to ski and be together, to discuss their future, if any, was why they were here. Perhaps he wasn't taking her writing romantic paperbacks seriously enough, even though the money seemed to roll in. He was merely a rather successful real estate salesman. He couldn't seem to rouse enthusiasm for reading about young heroines stupid enough to visit remote mansions where sinister but erotically handsome men lived lives influenced by secrets that caused them to act downright strange. Vivian was considering leaving for New York. Didn't writers write wherever they happened to be? But Vivian thought she should be in New York. He wasn't going to be walk-

ing anywhere for weeks. He needed assistance to perform even bodily functions. And if he didn't stop brooding, Vivian would become annoyed.

"Why don't you pack up? Leave me here to mend?"

"You'd wallow in feeling sorry for yourself," she said. "I have no intention of driving back to D.C. alone. I can ski during the day and visit you later."

She came to sit beside him on the bed. Her cheeks were still pink from the cold. He realized he was admiring her again, her vitality and wide blue eyes. That was what first attracted him. But he was learning there was quick perception behind the eyes. Sometimes he wondered if she sensed things about him. Things he hadn't told her yet. Didn't ever want to tell her.

"What about the nights?" he asked.

"I'm sure people at the lodge will take pity on me, ask me to dinner."

"Maybe like a goodlooking guy from New York?" he speculated.

A tubby aide with a Dutchboy haircut knocked on the open door.

"I'm Ruby, Mr. Cooper. After supper you and I have a date. Dr. Pritchard said to give you one of my special back rubs." She sucked in her cheeks and lowered her head in a coy way.



"Don't worry. I know how to work all these ropes."

Vivian slid off the high bed. "Now I know why they put you in this room at the end of the hall. Even the room across from you is vacant."

"I'm just joking," Ruby said. "I treat all my back rubs the same. Sometimes even my boyfriend says I kid too much."

Norman returned with flowers in a vase, and another aide arrived with supper on a tray. Vivian picked up her coat.

Chris slipped his arm around her when she kissed him goodbye. "Don't leave me to this," he said, suddenly feeling lonely. "New York can wait."

He ate alone, a fluorescent light above the bed keeping February dusk at bay beyond the window. Putting down his coffee cup, he spread the ball of paper flat on the table between the tray and the typewriter.

Ha Ha

It was printed in pencil. Childish letters. That was all. His fingers had found it beneath pillows this morning. After the needle last night someone could have propped a brick under his head and he would have slept. The hours between the moment of wrenching impact on the trail and waking this morning were a sort of surreal mist. Vivian holding his head; faces, voices, pain.

Later the sight of a figure standing in the hall doorway.

Dr. Pritchard, brisk and fiftyish, came in to reassure him after supper. No denying healing would take time. The tibia was broken and the femur cracked. The colles fracture of the arm was routine. Staying here, in their small, somewhat dated hospital, would be more comfortable than an ambulance ride to Washington.

Ruby arrived with liniment and worked the pulleys. He thought she took an almost lascivious pleasure in pulling aside his short hospital gown and flexing stubby fingers along his spine. But his muscles rejoiced. Her reputation seemed warranted. "My boyfriend, he kids me about my magic fingers."

Vivian telephoned after eight, told him she was having dinner with the couple who occupied the room next to theirs. There was no guy from New York, not yet. He said goodnight when a gaunt nurse appeared, introduced herself as Miss Emma, and proceeded to give him an injection in his right arm. Doctor's orders for a good night. She turned down the lights, and within minutes he was aware of a warm drowsiness. His leg in a cast was a white cloud floating above him.

A soft sound. Norman was standing beside the bed.

"Push the button if you need

anything," he whispered as people do when lights are low. Before stepping into the hall he turned back. "I recognized you last night. The minute I saw you, Mr. Cooper."

The sedative subdued any dismay he might have felt. It even dissolved the resolution he'd made not to think about his previous stay in this hospital. After he and Katie were brought in that rainy night. Or was it morning? Four A.M. Poor Katie . . .

A bell shattered sleep. His hand grappled for the telephone. He listened to a hollow voice.

"Ha, Ha! Now it's your turn."

The next morning passed with routine visits from nurses and aides, a dietitian, an intern who had prodded and pulled. They left him to the awkward task of sponging off and shaving with one hand. He practiced pulling himself erect with a bar suspended from the frame overhead. Working out occasionally in a gym was paying off. His right arm was his pitching arm. Provided he could limp onto a field this spring, he could still pitch softball. A mirror propped against the typewriter reflected a glow of sunburn picked up during his few hours on the slopes.

He grimaced at himself. Aside from Norman, who else had recognized him? The voice on the

telephone provided no clues to identity. Androgynous might describe it.

He telephoned news of his accident to his father in Baltimore and to his secretary in D.C. She accused him of going to drastic extremes to extend his vacation.

When the telephone rang, he chided himself for feeling apprehensive.

"The slopes were heaven this morning," Vivian said. "I'm about to have lunch with some new friends."

"Have you ever tried cutting a chop with one hand?" he asked.

"Wasn't there a cute nurse to cut it for you? Are you losing your touch?" As yet there was no guy from New York. But a disk jockey from Philadelphia was being solicitous.

"Seriously, Chris. Are you all right?"

"Just lightheaded from shots. Bored. I could use a scotch on the rocks."

"I'll bring some magazines and paperbacks later today. No romances."

He tried using his right hand to type thank you notes for flowers and to catch up on correspondence. The typewriter irritated him by sliding across the table.

"Need some help?"

He glanced up at the blonde girl in the hall doorway. She was about his age, slender. A green suede suit and white silk blouse,



professional yet feminine. Her smile was tentative until he returned a fullblown one.

"Gert!" He used the bar to pull himself forward. "My God! What are you doing here?"

"Seeing a patient. What else?"

"You finished medical school!"

"I told you I would." There was the old, almost obdurate note in her voice. There were times when it had aggravated him. Finally they went their separate ways. Not solely because of her determination. There was Katie.

"This calls for a scotch," he said, "but I can't offer you more than a Coke."

"I don't think they'd really encourage vodka martinis," she said. "That *was* your drink, wasn't it?"

The distressing association would probably always be there.

"Gert, I wasn't drunk that night," he insisted. "I know what people thought."

She gave him a wan smile. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I was away at school during it all. I heard you got off."

But he didn't need to say that people still blamed him.

"I hesitated about stopping by," she said. "You didn't return my call. I was in Washington last fall, attending a seminar. I telephoned your office."

Apology sounded thin against embarrassment. His secretary leaving a note informing him that

a Dr. Taylor had telephoned. The next day dialing the number, a voice informing him that "Dr. Taylor checked out this morning." No mention of a Dr. Gertrude Taylor. He should have known. Was he so self-centered? Didn't he have faith in people's ambitions? Was he treating Vivian that way?

"I guess I never understood about goals, how important they are to some people," he said. "I just wanted to luck into working at something that paid good money. Enjoy life."

Gert pulled open a drawer in the bedside cabinet and found a roll of bandages and scissors. She cut a few pieces of tape and used them to anchor the typewriter in place. He noticed she still wore an abundance of rings.

"You were always resourceful," he said. "Thanks from me and from Vivian. She owns it. I'm trying to get her to buy a laptop."

"Her name's Vivian? I saw her yesterday when she carried it in with some flowers. Very pretty. Is it serious?"

"Who knows?" Her bluntness disconcerted him. "Like you, she says I'm egocentric and stubborn. But the two of you have something else in common. Romantic paperbacks. You still read them?"

She nodded and laughed. "But I hope you haven't made the same awful accusation to Vivian you made to me." Curious, he



frowned. "You told me, during one of our blowups, that I was substituting them for the real thing."

"I was a jerk. But I'm eating my words. Vivian writes the stuff. Romantic paperbacks."

Interest lighted her face. It was a pretty face, he thought. Always had been. More mature now, not quite as vulnerable.

"She writes under the name of Sara Trevane. Most of them use a phony name. She has a shelf of them in her apartment."

"I've read her." Gert's face flushed. "She's good. What's your opinion?"

"To tell the truth," he admitted, "I've never read one, of hers or anyone else's."

Gert laughed again. This time it was a full, hearty sound. "You haven't changed, Chris. Not one iota?"

Flowers arrived from his office that afternoon. Norman brought them in. He made no reference to the remark he'd made last night. Chris wondered if, under sedation, he might have imagined it. Even the telephone call could have been a dream. He rested his head against the pillows, still not resigned to being trussed in this bed like some poor laboratory animal. Dozing off again, he saw green grass and white stones and somberly dressed people beneath a flapping awning.

His eyes flickered open.

Dreaming of Katie's funeral, he thought. There was still the hearing to face after that day. He'd stood apart from her family, feeling isolated and rejected. Her older brother had been drinking and mumbled a curse when he passed by. After the service Louise, the stout younger sister, became hysterical. Her father and brother helped her to the limousine.

Vivian came in, her cheek against his lips still frigid from the February afternoon. He endeavored cheerfulness and enthusiasm for the magazines and bag of paperback thrillers. He mentioned Gert's visit.

Vivian pulled up a chair. "Competition?"

"There was a time."

"Before or after Katie?"

"I walked out on her because of Katie. She didn't have to bother stopping by today."

"In my books," Vivian said, "she'd be one of those spurned women. They need watching."

"I didn't sense anything like that. Talking to her made me think about us. You should give New York a chance because it's important to you. Long distance marriages are tough, but we could try."

She paled. "That's a proposal." She stood up and went to stare out the window. It was the first time he'd seen glibness fail her. But her face was bright when



she came back to him. She leaned down to kiss him, then regarded him thoughtfully.

"You don't seem yourself today, darling. Your poor leg is probably giving you hell. We have plenty of time to talk."

Ruby came in, twitching her fingers at him in an enticing way.

"We'll have fun tonight, Mr. Cooper. I think my boyfriend's jealous."

He didn't eat much supper. His leg felt pinched, as if the cast was squeezing it. Dr. Pritchard said that to be on the safe side they would X-ray tomorrow. Ruby's massage relaxed him while she told him he reminded her of her boyfriend. Later Norman helped him prepare for the night.

"Katie went to my high school," he said. "She was two years ahead of me. It was a terrible thing to happen. The family went all to pieces."

"I lost track of them," Chris said.

Norman rolled his eyes. "I guess so. The old man lives alone. Her brother was already a lush and disappeared. The sister went to some kind of home for awhile."

Miss Emma switched off the television before rolling up his sleeve.

"Don't make a face," she scolded. "Doctor says you're uncomfortable."

The telephone rang before Miss Emma left. She answered, firm

with the caller about telephoning after eight o'clock.

"I'm sorry, Chris," Vivian said.

"Has the disk jockey come on?"

"We had dinner at the lodge."

"Drinks later?"

"I'm used to more scintillating company," she said and wished him a good night.

Some time after midnight the telephone rang. He struggled out of sleep and managed to bring the receiver against his ear.

"You've had it easy," the voice said.

It was eight A.M. when Mrs. Ogilvie, the head nurse, made a militant entrance into his room. By that time a cleaning woman had been in to sweep broken glass into a pan and to wet-mop the floor around his bed. Sheets were changed, and an orderly sponged him and pulled a dry hospital gown over his head. An empty scotch bottle stood on the dresser.

"We have rules in this hospital, Mr. Cooper." Mrs. Ogilvie glared at him in a way that would wither a more confident man than Chris felt then and since he'd awakened, his gown and sheets reeking with the unmistakable odor of whisky. "We have no objection to a patient's having an occasional drink of alcohol. Provided the doctor gives permission. Your conduct is uncalled for and rude."

“I don’t know where the bottle came from,” he said. “I didn’t drink whatever was in it.”

“If you have a problem . . .”

He recognized her tone of voice, the judgment in her eyes. Gripping the bar, he pulled himself erect.

“I haven’t had a drink since the night before I was brought in here.”

“How can you explain your condition when Miss Denis checked on you this morning? You and your bedclothes drenched. A bottle under the bed and a broken glass on the floor?”

“I can’t explain it, Mrs. Ogilvie.” He met her gaze. There was almost an audible crackling in the room. “I don’t have a drinking problem.”

She glanced down at her hands, gripped in a knot at her waist. He knew she remembered. Of course she remembered.

“For the past two nights Miss Emma has given me a needle. I was in no shape to have a private party.”

“You have been receiving telephone calls,” she accused. “The night nurse heard the telephone ringing. After midnight.” He didn’t reply and her jaw firmed. “We can have the phone turned off after nine o’clock.”

“No, Mrs. Ogilvie.” It was a quick decision, and he wondered how wise it was. “I have a family

and friends. I don’t want to be cut off from them.”

She took a heavy breath, as if deciding on some new tack.

“I didn’t ask anyone from outside to bring a bottle. I didn’t bribe one of the employees.”

“We’ve never needed a security man,” she said. “I shall have to report this, Mr. Cooper.”

She gave him a sweeping, incredulous look and left.

After embarrassment shifted to anger, he felt better. The incident wasn’t referred to by the staff. But he was aware of a mixture of reactions: scorn, uncertainty, even amusement. He was dealing with a crank. Obviously someone who was expressing a sick rage at his having the gall to return to this town. Because of Katie. There didn’t seem to be any other explanation.

Word of his accident was circulating, and several vases of flowers from D.C. friends and a fruit basket from his father arrived.

Gert stopped in before lunch.

“I hear you’re sticking to your story,” she said.

He recalled her being a good listener. But that was years ago, before he walked away.

“You’ve heard it all,” he said. “No sense in repeating it.”

“Yesterday you were wishing for scotch.”

“Don’t rub it in! I’ve done my share of drinking. I’ve never had



a problem. I guess that's what alcoholics say. I'm not an alcoholic. Don't think people didn't put that in my mind after the accident." He saw something close behind her eyes. "I wasn't drunk that night. Katie and I went to one of those bring-your-own parties. We had a bottle in the car. It splashed the hell over us when we hit the abutment."

"Are you thinking revenge?" she asked. "Haven't they waited a long time?"

"No more needles," he said. His head ached, and nerves were jumping along his leg. "I'm alone at the end of this hall. There's an empty room across from me."

He told himself she thought he was dramatizing things. Her smile was too bright. Then she pulled a paperback from her coat pocket.

"I brought a Sara Trevane novel. You said you'd never read one." She placed it beside the typewriter and several letters in envelopes he'd finished typing. "Vivian might be pleased. It might be a long night without sedation."

He felt in better spirits after she left. He endeavored to find a more comfortable position. The pulleys squeaked, and the cast on his arm bumped against the rails. He wished he'd told her the truth about the car crash. But it was late in the day for that. He

hadn't even leveled with his lawyer.

After lunch, X-rays revealed that the fracture was accurately set. Vivian was waiting for him when they wheeled his bed into the room. She listened to his report with strained good humor.

"I'm glad things are okay," she said. "But what the hell's going on? That stiff Mrs. Ogilvie accused me of smuggling a bottle of scotch to you."

Angry, he reached for the telephone.

"Don't bother. She didn't actually say it. She certainly implied it."

He repeated what he'd told Mrs. Ogilvie.

"You can't expect people to believe you," Vivian said. "You told me yesterday on the phone you wanted a drink. Someone could have overheard."

She looked up from reading the card on the fruit basket.

"You think it's because people blame you for that accident. It's been years. You're so stubborn."

"Norman said he recognized me and went to school with Katie. Would he say that if he had something nutty in mind?"

"Who, then?" Vivian threw up her hands. "You said Katie was so pretty. She must have had loads of friends. Men friends who thought you got off too easy. What about her family?"

“I never really met them. Except her father, once.”

“But you were going to marry the girl. Or were you?”

“Jesus, Viv. Have a heart.”

She was gazing out the window at frozen trees. What could he expect? Yesterday, suggesting marriage. Today, raking through an old love affair. And the bizarre business of the scotch.

She kissed his cheek. He held her lean shoulder close for a minute, tempted but knowing he wouldn't mention the other things. “One of my heroines would scream and run from a man like you,” Vivian said. “Dr. Gert, Katie, and now me. I guess there were others.”

He groaned. “I'm not a good risk.”

Supper trays rattled along the hall. Vivian pulled on her coat.

“I met the lovely Dr. Gert this afternoon. She was here in your room when I arrived. Is she still in love with you?”

He watched her wrap a green scarf around her neck, peer into a mirror, and smile at her reflection. He never knew what she'd say or do.

“Gert's a fan of yours.” He indicated the paperback on the stand. “She brought me that and told me to read it.”

Vivian glanced at the cover, a girl in a swirling cloak running through woods and a label on the front noting a new edition. “An-

other reprint. Thank you, Sara Trevane!” She hesitated at the hall door. “Chris, is there anything I don't know? I'd like to help.”

He shook his head. He'd shattered enough illusions.

“You've been a bad boy,” Ruby said when she came in. “I don't know what my boyfriend will say.”

He wondered if Ruby had known Katie.

“I'm going dancing later,” Vivian told him when she telephoned.

“You need cheering up,” he said. “The Philadelphia disk jockey?”

“Two handsome insurance agents from Baltimore. I think they're using me as a front.”

He refused Miss Emma's needle.

“Ring if you need it,” she said. She surprised him by putting a hand on his shoulder. “I've been wearing this white cap for forty-two years. I've seen a lot that no one can account for. My money's on you, Mr. Cooper.”

He almost kissed her.

Television, playing softly, occupied the evening. He roused once, thinking he heard the telephone. It stood there white and silent. He grinned, recalling Miss Emma, her white cap with its starched wings sprouting from her gray hair. Something moved

into place in his memory. The silhouette in the hall doorway that first night. No cap. There was a feminine softness to the shape. Unless the drugs were playing games.

He used the remote control to switch off the television. He lay in dim light from the hall, waiting for the telephone to ring. He slept fitfully. He would wake to hear wind beyond the window. By dawn he wished the telephone had rung. Someone was playing with him, and they were winning.

The chatter and hurrying footsteps of shifts changing. A day nurse came in and seemed relieved to find everything, including the patient, in order. Sponging off and shaving, he decided that perhaps his ordeal was finished. Someone had made their point. They pricked at him with the note, the calls. The coup was his humiliation before the staff and Vivian. A secret drinker. He was exposed, put in his place.

He enjoyed breakfast and was ready for whatever challenge Vivian might throw him when she telephoned before lunch.

"You sound like your old self," she said.

"How did the dance go?"

"The agents were both marvelous. It was fun. I'll see you later."

After lunch he napped to compensate for lost sleep. He opened his eyes, conscious of another presence in the room.

"Mr. Cooper, I am Dr. Rhine. I'm administrator of this hospital. I need an explanation."

His voice was deep and authoritative. It complemented his six feet plus of muscular build beneath an expensively cut blue suit. He was somewhere in his late forties.

"I've already told Mrs. Ogilvie everything I know about the scotch business," Chris said.

"This is another matter." There was an envelope and sheet of paper in Dr. Rhine's hand. Chris recognized them as similar to the stationery he used for typing correspondence. "It's not a pleasant subject."

The administrator didn't sound cordial. Chris thought he recognized contempt in his eyes. He reached for the bar to pull himself up.

"This is the letter you wrote to Ruby Miller," Dr. Rhine said. "She came in early today. She found the letter in an envelope with her name typed across it. An orderly remembers the envelope was among letters on your tray. He mailed them except for Ruby's. It wasn't stamped, and he left it for her."

Perplexity pulled at Chris's face.

"Ruby is very upset. I don't blame her. In fact, we sent her home."

Chris reached for the letter.

Four typed lines with several

crossovers comprised an obscene message. There was no signature. Merely, "Your eager patient in #111."

He couldn't speak.

"We can't tolerate this, Cooper. We surely can't expect our employees to stand for it." He retrieved the letter from Chris's fingers. "We've decided not to make this a police matter. You should appreciate that."

He moved around the bed to the lap table. The typewriter was still taped in place. An unfinished letter curled out of it. He placed the obscene letter beside it, and there was no disputing it had been typed on the same machine.

"You are not a physically ill patient, Cooper. Cases like yours can be transported by ambulance."

Humiliation again. This time burning. He forced himself to meet Dr. Rhine's gaze.

"I've never seen this thing before."

"The drinking episode was bad enough." The doctor's face was grim. "You must have a doctor in Washington. I suggest you call him and make arrangements for another facility."

"Anybody could have typed that crap," Chris said. "I was out of here yesterday, being X-rayed. I was under sedation the night the whisky was brought in. Call the police."

Dr. Rhine shifted from one foot

to another, probably considering bad publicity. "We're offering compromise, Mr. Cooper. Think it over. Think it over damned carefully."

Alone, Chris thrashed about in bed, his right leg swinging uselessly above him. He flinched at the pain. Calling the police might be reckless.

Vivian arrived, flushed and ecstatic about a day spent whisking along mountain trails. She was the spirited girl he'd encountered that first time in Rock Creek Park last summer. An open Frisbee game, strangers competing against strangers, and the two of them went on to dinner together that evening. Now she was apparently oblivious to this new predicament. He could only listen until her enthusiasm gradually deflated.

"I'm being selfish," she said. "You've been cooped up all day." She kissed him softly on his mouth. "Let's talk about us."

He turned his head away. She removed her hands from his shoulders and stood up.

"The other day you said to go to New York." Her expression was wary. "Something's wrong."

"There's always something wrong." He worked at summoning words. It was almost as difficult as protecting Katie's secret during the days following the accident. "Ruby's accused me of coming on to her."

He was frank. She sank down onto a chair.

"How long were you out of this room?" She glanced about as if there was some clue to discover. "Anybody could have typed that note. Gert Taylor was here when I came in but said she couldn't wait for you any longer. I was here alone when they brought you back. God knows who was here before Dr. Taylor." She rubbed a hand along her neck. "I should never have brought the typewriter."

"You should never have picked up a stranger in Rock Creek Park."

"You're trying to frighten me," she said. "You're telling me this awful story. You're getting even for missing a good time on the slopes. Nobody would do this to you because of a girl who died so long ago." Her mouth twisted with a rueful smile. "Anyway, you're so vain. I didn't pick you up. You picked me up."

"You don't know anything about me," he said. "You've never met my father or my sister."

"And you've never bothered anything about my folks, like I'm an orphan." She moved her shoulders in a conciliatory way. "You told me you never really knew Katie's family. What about Dr. Gert's?"

"I guess I become too engrossed with girls I fall in love with to bother about their relations."

"Maybe you don't really fall in love," she said.

He wanted to be alone. To cope with the idea of being thought of as a sicko. Unable to control his lust or obsession or whatever the hell twists some men.

"Take the car and drive home. They're throwing me out of here."

"You're shutting me out. Let me stay here tonight. I can sleep in that empty room across the hall."

He persuaded her to return to the lodge. He was hurting her, but he needed solitude.

They came in to take his pulse and temperature, fill his water pitcher, pick up his menu selection sheet. There was a minimum of conversation. The silent treatment. Strain was as evident as the antiseptic smell of the place. Except for Norman.

"I don't know about Ruby," he said. Chris had offered him his pick of the fruit basket, and he was peeling a tangerine. "People say there's no boyfriend. I think she just got tired of waiting for one. She brings in silly birthday and Easter cards. They say she sends them to herself."

Waiting for a supper tray Chris thought about that. She could have composed an obscene note and typed it here in the room when it was vacant. The same for the scotch episode. Ruby had the run of the place. He had no proof, nothing to substantiate anything.

He grabbed the bar, twisted to reach the drawer in the bedside stand, pulled it out. The *Ha Ha* note was missing. He should have shown it to Dr. Rhine. But it was printed in pencil. He didn't know when it disappeared.

After supper he telephoned the lodge. He owed it to Vivian. There was a message: she had driven with friends to a nearby dinner theater. The insurance agents, he supposed. Why not? Maybe tomorrow she'd leave for New York. What could he expect?

Miss Emma didn't pat his shoulder. "I hope you didn't write that stuff to Ruby," she said.

At least she was keeping an open mind.

He refused the needle again. Her smile was on the tender side when she left. Was some old lover's ghost haunting her? Was there a rose pressed between pages?

Gert appeared at nine thirty. Cord jeans and a baggy white sweater were a change from her tailored suits. No makeup, not even lipstick.

"It's Friday," he said. "No date tonight?"

Something flickered across her eyes. He realized he was relying on bravado to face her.

"An emergency," she told him. "A very old lady with a very bad heart." She sat down on the foot of his bed, shaking her head at

him. "You're making it tough for us."

"I'm having a great time," he said. "Shackled to this damned bed, boozing and making up dirty notes. I should be a writer, like Sara Trevane."

"Why would you do this to yourself?" She seemed to be studying him. Perhaps recalling times they had spent together. Maybe how she was crying the night he left. "You don't have to write filthy stuff to homely girls. You won't give us anything to go by."

"I thought I had something. But they took it."

"Who is 'they,' Chris?"

"Don't play psychologist." His voice was thick with disdain. He told her about the note.

She sighed. He knew how it sounded. He'd been waiting to see her. Now it all seemed hopeless. "I don't want to leave. Not like this."

"It might be best." She picked up the Sara Trevane paperback, laid it down again. "You haven't even started it."

He watched television until shortly before midnight when Gert returned. "Keeping an eye on me?" he asked.

"They told me you didn't want a needle. Chris, you look exhausted."

"I didn't take one last night. There were no telephone calls. No one stood in the doorway



watching." This was the first time he'd mentioned those things. She probably thought he was cracking. Or frightened. What the hell. A few hours of oblivion would be a relief. "Have it your way, doctor."

He talked of inconsequential things, waiting for the effects of the injection. "I'm big in real estate in D.C. If you want to buy a townhouse in Georgetown, give me a buzz." His face felt rubbery when he grinned. "Did you mail me a brochure about a lodge up here, Gert?"

"I was here the night they brought you in. I came by your room and stood looking at you for a few minutes. For old times' sake, I guess."

How did she mean it?

Sleep, a warm blanket, covered him.

... Somehow he'd managed to escape them. No bones broken. They'd plastered his leg and arm in casts to keep him here. They were somewhere behind him on the trail. His skis hissed across snow. He pitched forward into a drift, his face buried. He opened his eyes to the dim room. He was choking, his lips paralyzed, and he could not raise his arm to ring for help. He could only breathe through his nostrils.

His eyes moved. They searched shadows. He struggled, the bed and pulleys creaking. He was helpless. Something across his

lips. His mouth taped. He swallowed back nausea. His good arm was restrained by the sheet, tangled in the rails. Finally he lay waiting.

A figure stepped out of a dark corner. No face. He heard inhalations of air through his own nose. The figure stood at the foot of the bed.

So this was it. Some sort of ghoul out of a child's nightmare. He subdued a compulsion to speak. It would be a futile mumble. That was part of it, of course. Some sort of debasing plea on his part. He'd been softened, shown how fragile independence was. But he would not play.

It moved around the bed. Light from the hall shone against eyes watching from behind slits. Some sort of black warmup suit topped by a black ski mask. Christ! Half the town wore them. He could hear it breathing. A gloved hand reached out to touch the sheet.

Was it supposed to be some figure of retribution? For poor Katie? He didn't owe Katie anything. Sometimes he thought Katie owed him.

Woolen fingers stroked his face. They were pulling tape from his lips. He moved his head against the burning. He was sucking air through his mouth.

A game, and the next move was his. He was probably expected to summon his voice and to shout down the place. Instead he lay

dormant, heart pounding, reverberating through his head. He could make rules, too. Clamp teeth, press lips together. If he bellowed alarm, they would come running to find him alone. They would tell him he was a lost cause.

He met the gaze. His eyes ached from not blinking. Air rattled in his throat, perspiration rolled across his face. It was a competition.

There was a sigh or a breath of satisfaction or disgust. The figure moved to the door, glanced back. Before it disappeared, he saw a flash of blade.

Sheets and mattress were soaked. His right arm was still restrained. His breathing was rough, as if he'd bounded up flights of stairs. Twice, during the rest of the night, a nurse with a flashlight peered in. He would close his eyes.

Had he won this round? Or at least drawn a tie?

He was still awake when the morning nurse came in.

"You've had a fever. Let's change everything to nice and dry."

That was the only trace of what he'd been through.

Changed and dry, he rested against pillows, thinking it could all have been sedative induced fantasy. That's what they would think if he told them.

Routine visits by the staff rat-

tled his nerves. By ten o'clock they left him in peace, and he telephoned his doctor's office in D.C. Today was hopeless, but the doctor's office called back, informing him to be ready for an ambulance by two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Then he slept until a lunch tray was brought in. He picked at food, wondering if the lodge had let Vivian know he'd called last night.

"Your chart says you were feverish last night," Gert said later. She looked fresh and tailored again. "No sign of fever today. Take a nap. You still look tired."

"Someone in black was standing at the foot of the bed last night," he said. "He had a knife."

Her face stiffened, and she chuckled. "Sometimes pills or a fever do that."

Frustration bit at him.

He told her an ambulance was scheduled for tomorrow.

"I think Dr. Rhine is having second thoughts," she said. "I mean, there is Ruby. We've heard rumors."

"So poor Ruby gets it in the neck?"

"She's back at work today, but you won't see her. They've decided to wait and see."

"Wait for what? For Ruby to write a note? Or to catch me with another bottle and a pack of dirty pictures?"

She was admiring today's de-



livery of cards and flowers and the fruit basket from his father. "Go back to your friends and job in Washington. And Vivian."

"You don't particularly care for Vivian, do you?"

There was that flicker across her eyes.

"Vivian and I visited yesterday. She's very pretty and very intense about you." She picked up the Sara Trevane paperback, made a wry face and put it down again. "You won't even read her books!"

"I've had a few things on my mind."

"Like reliving the accident? Think about it. Has anything that's happened here been related to Katie? Except in your own head?"

Furious, he reached for the bar, pulled himself erect.

"Why did you come back?" He felt trapped by her eyes. "Because of an ad from the lodge—out of the blue? Or did you want to find out if people had forgotten or forgiven? Did anyone know you were coming back? Did someone here in the hospital remember Katie when you were brought in and decide on the spot to harass you? Wouldn't they have done something a lot sooner? Wouldn't they have followed you to D.C.?"

He grabbed an apple from the fruit basket. Threw it. Used all the pent-up force of days of phys-

ical restraint and anguish. It exploded against the wall.

Gert stared at him, white-faced. Then she went into the bathroom, returned with a wet towel, cleaned the wall, and mopped up the pulp from the floor.

He watched her like a repentant child. "You think I'm nuts."

She pulled a deep breath, but it wasn't an exasperated sound.

"You're a goodlooking man. Sexy. Don't give me that silly look. Girls have told you that all your life. Even after what's happened here, girls on the hall are still on your side. You've probably turned someone's libido to overdrive." She glanced at her watch. "You don't like feeling you're not in control of things. Now you know what women face."

She sent him a tolerant smile. "I remember you were good at softball. Your arm's still got it."

Vivian arrived ten minutes later.

"The desk at the lodge told me you called." Her coat sparkled with melting snow. It had started at noon and was blowing against the window.

"You've had a lousy week," he said.

"Last night was fun. The insurance boys again. After the theater we went dancing." She shed her exuberance. "I'm the one who should feel guilty. I was gung-ho to come here. My books don't im-

press you; I thought my skiing might. You're good at your job. You're laid back and casual. People like you. You're always a step ahead. There had to be some way I could make you sit up and notice me."

He shrugged. "*Something's* kept me calling you."

"I shouldn't have led you along that trail. They call it The Gulp. If you aren't experienced, there are drifts that can swallow a person. Covered rocks."

"Forget it. I misunderstood your signal and went breezing off alone." He patted the cast on his left arm. "The cost of keeping a step ahead."

He told her about leaving tomorrow. A blast of wind laced the window with snow. He suggested she return to the lodge before driving became a problem.

"The room across the hall is still vacant," she said. "Why don't you want me to stay?"

Why didn't he? Because of her mercurial moods? Or because of what he was sure he faced tonight?

When his supper tray arrived, Vivian was untaping the typewriter from the table and returning it to the case to take with her. She pulled on her coat. "I won't sleep. Not until you're out of here."

"Go dancing. Unless the insurance boys want to be alone together. Or take one of your pills."

While he ate supper, steam heat thumped inside the radiator, and a calm voice talked in hospital codes over the intercom system in the hall beyond. Once the voice paged Ruby.

Later he gazed up at his suspended right leg. The cast on his left arm felt heavier and clumsier. Last night he'd been allowed to glimpse the knife. Tonight he might need protection from it. Why in hell wasn't he calling Dr. Rhine in here? There was Gert, laughing at his mentioning a figure in black. That would be the reaction. Knowing glances exchanged. Too much booze. Too many women. Crazy, crazy.

A bulky woman with a ridiculously fragile white cap above a red face strode in from the hall.

"I'm Collins. Miss Emma couldn't make it in. This snow's something else." Grits and ham gravy were in her twang. She offered him a glass of juice, but he shook his head. "Well, I'll leave it on your table."

"Is it a farewell offering?" he asked.

"It's apple juice." Her thick hands pulled sheets taut. She gave him a severe look. "You have a reputation, Mr. Cooper. A reputation. We don't have full staff tonight. So no high jinks. I'm not partial to night shift anyway."

Too bad, sugar, he thought.

"You look weary enough to

sleep," she said. "I'd do that if I were you."

"No goodnight kiss?" he asked.

"Ha!" she exclaimed and went away.

By ten o'clock his eyes were burning. Watching TV was a struggle. He stiffened when someone stepped into the room. "Vivian!" He pulled himself up.

"Don't be a mess." She exuded self-confident cheerfulness. "I'm settled in the room across from you. The roads were slick when I tried leaving. No one has any objections. I had a nice supper with some nurses. But—" she threw a critical glance toward the hall "—they need a security guard here. Just because it's a hick town is no excuse. Before supper I took a shower. And someone came in my room and went through my things." She sniffed. "I could tell while I was dressing."

"Is anything missing?"

"Not that I can find."

"Christ!" he exclaimed. "Don't report it. What will they think?"

"The nurses? They still think you're very desirable."

She pulled up a chair and announced she would watch TV with him. He resigned himself to it; she was endeavoring to be helpful, and he couldn't blame her if she suspected something was going on. He worried about the business of someone going through her things . . .

. . . He blinked his eyes. Vivian

was standing beside him, the TV dark.

"Go back to sleep." She'd found the glass of apple juice, but he motioned it away. "You're a stinking patient. I'll see you tomorrow."

Didn't she know what people said about tomorrow?

"I'll follow the ambulance in your car." She caressed his jaw with cool fingers. "I'll be across the hall. Why won't you let yourself sleep?"

Alone, he stared at dark corners of the room. Succumbing to sleep would be giving an advantage. Soon someone would arrive as silently as snow was piling against the windowsill. He must stay alert. There was Vivian to think about. She was being patient with him. A week ago he couldn't have imagined her presence irritating him. Would there be a time when he could tell her what was twisting him to distraction?

He picked up the Trevane paperback, flipping through pages, puckering his face at flowery names and passionate expressions. There was his and Vivian's talk the other afternoon. Maybe he did fall in love too easily, too fast. Was he mistaking infatuation for intimacy? Was Vivian as much of a stranger to him as Sara Trevane?

"I don't believe it," Gert said. He raised his head abruptly. To-

night her jeans were stuffed inside her boots. She explained she owned a four-wheel drive and was ferrying staff back and forth between the hospital and their homes. The elderly heart patient was hanging on. "Did Sara put you to sleep? I thought you might want to discuss it."

He laid the paperback aside, making a remark about its being pretty much what he'd expected.

"No needles," he said.

"I don't imagine you want to see another dark figure."

"Suppose it wasn't imagination?"

She pushed ringed fingers into sweater pockets. He searched for some sort of challenge in her eyes but found only appraisal there. And he thought perhaps a decision.

"You'll be away from all this tomorrow," she said. "Katie won't bother you then."

He almost told her. About arguing with Katie that night. Giving in against better judgment. But his mind snapped shut against the urge after such a long period of discipline.

"Come in and talk if you have a chance," he said. "For old times' sake."

She held out the glass of apple juice. "Your voice sounds like sandpaper."

He drank it down and complained that it was warm. She took the glass into the bathroom

and returned with it filled to the brim. Water was icy and refreshing along his throat.

"I'll be back," she promised.

In the meantime there were preparations to make. He'd thought of them on and off during the day. There weren't many options. They'd seemed absurd by daylight. Now he sat up, selected a flat pillow from those on the bed. When he lay back, the pillow was beneath the blanket and sheet across his chest. For good measure he slid the Sara Trevane paperback under the covers over his heart.

There was light from the hall. Venetian blinds were open against the night. Snowflakes melted against panes.

Pathetic preparations. But he felt warm, secure. He opened his eyes wide. Too warm, too secure. An insidious pull of sleep. He forced himself up. Was it the juice? Drugged? When? Before Collins brought it in? After? He rebelled at that.

He fought against reeling senses. Breathe! Breathe! His right hand slid beneath covers, followed the rubber cord, pressed a thumb against the button.

Collins came striding in with a flashlight.

"I can't stay awake," he mumbled. His lips felt contorted. Collins was glaring at him. "Drugs! In the juice!"

"Mr. Cooper! I said no high

jinks! I brought in that glass of juice myself."

"Call Gert. Dr. Taylor."

"Dr. Taylor's with a patient. The patient is sick." She looked back at him. "What do you mean you can't stay awake?"

She left. He fell back against pillows.

All along he'd resisted the idea of giving names to his opponent. Now, whatever he'd swallowed was peeling away layers of resistance. Where was Norman? He knew Katie. Did Ruby? Gert knew her. He'd walked out on Gert. For Katie.

He rolled his head from side to side. Stay conscious. Think.

There were times when Katie confounded him. She would promise to go for professional help. People knew about her brother, but he couldn't believe it about Katie at first. She liked to dance and laugh and make love. She would cross a line. Drinks became stronger, an obsession. He was always smoothing over scrapes. Suddenly, driving his car one afternoon, he realized he didn't love her.

It was a stark fact. Love or infatuation, whichever, had vanished. It was like switching off a VCR in the middle of a movie.

He was breathing evenly now. He wiped his face with an edge of sheet. The drug wasn't as powerful as a needle.

My God! Gert. She'd tried to

see him in D.C. The needle she gave him one night. The juice. The glass of water.

There were times when he knew he felt more than infatuation for Gert. But too late. And guilt would stab at him when he decided to break off with Katie. But Katie sensed it. She told him when they left the party that night. She didn't need anyone's sympathy. She was perfectly capable of driving. Was he afraid she might dent his precious car? No, she *wouldn't* move over. She pressed a foot against the gas. It was all he could manage to close the door. And less than a mile later she steered into the abutment.

Was it deliberate?

People assumed he was driving. It was between Katie and him.

A figure entered the room. It merged with shadows. There was a cool voice over the intercom, a sigh of wind beyond the window, throbbing of a pulse within his ears. His leg hung useless above him. His left arm was heavy in its cast. If he could suddenly sit up, leap out of bed. If he could make some violent move. But that was the point of it all. To grind into him this sense of submission.

"Is this it?" he asked. "The big scene?"

A dark outline against shadows. A glimmer of blade against hall light.

"I loved you," he said. "I realized how much even before Katie died. I wanted to tell you."

His fingers could not locate the call button. Skin along his spine prickled. The figure was standing beside him. An arm rose, knife in hand. A flashing arc of steel across him. He bellowed from deep within his lungs. A pounding pain across his chest jerked his body. The bed rattled against his paroxysm.

A woman appeared in the hall doorway. The figure turned toward it.

"Vivian!" he shouted. "Vivian!"

They were two shapes grappling and moaning, pulling and pushing. He reached for the fruit basket. Gripped an apple. Threw it at the masked head.

Both figures fell to the floor. He fought against his restraints. Gert's face rose up beside him, eyes dilated with terror.

Collins and Norman came running in. Light flashed on. They struggled and subdued the figure on the floor. The ski mask was pulled off. Vivian's dark hair was a spiky halo around her wild face.

Gert came in before dawn and sat on the side of his bed. She'd combed her hair and was almost composed. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from a sweater pocket. "Excuse the unprofessionalism."

She lighted up and inhaled deeply.

His leg was pounding, and his chest felt like someone had danced in high heels across it. A policeman had slipped the knife into a plastic bag and taken it away. There was hysterical laughter and a commotion in the hall before things quieted down.

"You knew, didn't you?" he said.

"Not enough to say more than I did," she told him. "It seemed so weird. And you wouldn't read the damned book." She picked it up off the bedside stand and handed it to him. "Read what it says, for God's sake. On the back cover."

His eyes followed black printing across slick cream paper. "The late Sara Trevane was a favorite romance writer to thousands of women. Since her recent death, this is the first of a series of reprints."

There was a ragged slash along the cover where it had deflected the blade from his heart. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"I bought it just last week," Gert said. "When you told me about Vivian, her pen name, I went home and looked at it. Something was wrong."

Meeting Vivian in Rock Creek Park, the months of inserting herself into his life, the brochure from the lodge. All planned. The

signal for him to *follow* a trail to The Gulp was how it was to end.

But the accident wasn't fatal. The desperate game in the hospital was improvised. He thought it might have been proving more satisfactory than the accident.

"I didn't know what to do," Gert said. "They'd have laughed me out the door here. Like I did with you." She gripped his hand. "Sorry about that."

Gert flushed her cigarette away in the bathroom and came back to him.

"I called the publisher in New York," she said. "I think they thought I was screwy. Sara Trevane was an elderly woman who died recently. Not really famous enough to merit more than a line or two. It was her real name. There were all those things you were going through. I didn't think they had anything to do with Katie Barrett until tonight. I passed the room Vivian was in and heard her taking a shower. I did what any redblooded woman does when she wants to get to the bottom of something. I sneaked a look in her purse. Sleeping pills and shards of glass. She must have broken a glass before she crept in the other night and planted it and the bottle in your room."

Gert moved her shoulders in a fatalistic way. Chris remembered the gesture even now.

"They say you can't escape So-

cial Security," Gert said. "I saw the card. She probably never used it. Katie's father has money. The brother never made a living. Louise—Vivian—didn't have to. The troubled baby sister. Everyone in town knew she went to an institution after Katie died. We forgot her. Who knows how long she's been out?"

"So much hate," Chris said.

"I guess Katie was Louise's idol, her role model," Gert said. "Anyway, revenge was her incentive. Change into a beautiful creature you couldn't resist. Appear and disappear. Except you weren't impressed with her posing as a writer. And she didn't research Sara Trevane or read enough. Not even the covers of the Trevane books. You thought Daddy's money was royalties."

All so futile. Poor Katie. Tragic Louise, breezing in and out of the room. Dragging along a portable typewriter to look authentic. Lighthearted telephone calls. Were there really insurance agents? A disk jockey? But he was leaving tomorrow. The uncomfortable sense of walking away again. At least he would be honest with Gert.

"I have a confession to make."

"They're not always so good for the soul." She stood up, looking tired but pretty as he remembered. "But I have one myself. Knowing you taught me something about men. And struggling

new doctors don't have time to lament lost lovers."

"We could have dinner together."

"Sure," she agreed. "If you don't object to my husband's coming along." He felt his jaw slacken.

She was laughing, holding out her fingers with their rings. One

was a wedding band. "Some of us use maiden names professionally." She reached out and smoothed back his hair. "Dear Chris. You must be more discerning, more observant about women. It could save your life."

She kissed his forehead. Told him to get some sleep.

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FICTION

La Carolina


Elaine Stirling



Illustration by Louise Goldenberg

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/98

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The focaccia could not have come at a worse time. The cat needed feeding, the taxi was waiting, and Caroline Wolniecz was late for her appointment with the chiropractor. She looked at the fresh round loaf covered with tomato sauce, basil, and onions and was beginning to get the familiar swirling in her tummy. The room was growing dark, and images were forming. She threw the bread onto the counter. "Not now, Fango. I don't care if you're the king of Siam, you'll just have to wait."

Blizzard, Libby's marmalade cat, was clawing angry scratches on the vertical beams of his multilayered condo. "All right, all right, you'll get your Pussy Feast even though it's your owner who should be doing this." She pulled the pop-top from the catfood can, spooned pinkish-gray stew into his bowl, and frowned when the taxi driver honked again. "Cabbies," she said to Blizzard, grabbing her purse, "are rude."

Next time she saw him was at Thursday morning market. She was just setting out the last bucket of two dollar carnation bunches when she saw a pair of brown and white wing-tipped alligator shoes. The tan pinstriped pants were perfectly tailored to rest on the instep, and she didn't need to look any higher to know that the jacket would be doublebreasted and heavily padded at the shoulders. "Your son is too showy," she had once told Fango's father. "He's gonna get himself in trouble, the way he shows off."

"That's why we need you," Giacobbe Ferelli had told her, three days before his arteries shut down for good. "You can see trouble coming."

"Did you get the focaccia?"

Caroline pressed both hands to her lower back and rose painfully. "I don't remember."

Federico "Fango" Ferelli leaned across the mini African violets. "Whaddaya mean, you don't remember?"

"I'm joking. Can't you take a joke? The focaccia was delicious. At least that's what I heard. My daughter took it to a potluck at the shelter and didn't bring any home."

"What do I care if it was delicious? Why didn't you get in touch?"

"I was busy."

Fango's thin lips turned down at the corners. "You know, for an old woman you got quite an attitude."

"Thank you. I'm free at noon, when the market's closed."

"What makes you think I'll be free?"

Caroline Wolniecz laughed. "Sometimes you're so much like your papa."

They met in the back of the family restaurant, one of six "family" restaurants in the city. This one was midscale Italian with high-backed booths along two walls and small gingham-covered tables in the center. There were no customers seated near them.

"So what did you see?" Fango asked when the half liter of house red had been delivered along with a basket of breadsticks.

"What I usually see. Fear, confusion."

"Whose fear?"

She broke a breadstick in two. "You want me to say you'll wipe out your enemy of the week? I can't do that."

"Why not? Is he gonna wipe out me?"

"Fango, relax!" she said in the same tone her chiropractor used on her. "Fortunes change from minute to minute. If you want me to tell you what I see now, right here in front of me, then you've got to sit back and get out of my way."

His mouth dropped open, and his right hand reached for the bulge beneath his coat, but Caroline wasn't worried. For all his inherited power Fango Ferelli was just a scared fifty-year-old kid with too much spray in his pompadour.

When the cannoli arrived three days later, it was a different story. Caroline loved cannoli. They reminded her of the blintzes her mother used to make in Kraków. She carried the bakery box to the living room where she kept her knitting and the good shears and sat in her favorite armchair to cut the string. Lifting the lid, she screamed.

Libby came running out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head. "What is it, Mom? What's the matter?"

There were six of them, all in a row. She couldn't tell who they were. They'd been wrapped in white cloth and rope, like in the old days when people couldn't afford coffins. She pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to keep her emotions in check.

"Mom," Libby said again, kneeling before her.

"There's going to be trouble," Caroline said in a small voice. "The worst, the worst I've ever seen."

"Where? When?"

She glanced into the box. "Near the river . . . soon."

Libby looked down. "These are cannoli."

"Yes."

"What do they have to do with this?"

“They just . . . reminded me.” Her daughter knew nothing about her long association with the family or why Italian baked goods arrived regularly at their door. Libby was the director of the local women’s shelter. Her picture was always in the paper denouncing some kind of oppression or other. Caroline wasn’t sure whether organized crime qualified as oppression, and she didn’t dare ask. Libby had a way of turning on people who didn’t think the way she did, and she was all Caroline had in the world.

“I’m going to throw these out,” she said.

“Why? They look delicious.” Libby reached for the box.

“No!” Caroline slapped her daughter’s hand.

“Mom! What is the matter with you?”

“The cream has gone sour.”

“You haven’t even tasted them.”

“I know, all right? The same way I know other things.” She pushed Libby out of the way. “I need to call a taxi.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“I’m leaving in ten minutes. I can give you a ride.”

Ten minutes. A taxi would take almost as long to get here, and the fare would be six dollars, one way. “All right, but you have to promise me no questions.”

“That’s not fair. You scare me half to death, I have a right to ask questions.”

“Fine, but I can’t promise I’ll have any answers.”

Libby had grown up with her mother’s second sight. Sometimes it was annoying, like the first time she smoked pot and came home to find an article on her pillow about the effect of cannabis on unborn babies. Other times it was like having one’s own private CNN, for her mother could see, in advance, tornadoes, celebrity breakups, and Third World revolutions. For the most part, however, it was impractical. The predictions could seldom be accessed by request, and when they could, they were colored by Mom’s hopelessly obsolete worldview. Libby had once asked about her relationship with a woman named Denise, and Mom had replied that Denise was warm and caring, but that Libby ought to let her go so she could find herself a husband.

“Where are we going?” Libby asked from behind the wheel of her cherry-red Toyota.

“North on Woolwich.”

Libby backed out of the drive onto Gordon Street, where cycling

college students battled for space with city buses and four lanes of traffic. "Anyone I know?"

Her mother didn't answer.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"This place on Woolwich, is it anyone I know?"

"No, nobody."

"Okay . . . so what about this thing you saw? Should I be worried?"

Again her mother didn't answer.

"You're not making this very easy."

"I can't help what I see."

"*What did you see, for Pete's sake?*"

"Can't talk about it."

"If you can't talk about it, how am I supposed to help you?"

Her mother turned to her. "Who said you were supposed to?"

"I'm your daughter. It's my job to help."

Caroline shook her head. "That's the trouble with this world today. Too many eager beavers wanting to help people who never asked for it."

Libby tightened her grip on the wheel and on the retort that wanted so badly to come out. It came out. "Some people aren't able to ask for help, Mom. That doesn't mean they don't need it."

"Maybe so," she said mildly.

Libby was about to press the point again when she realized that her mother had grown calm. Nothing remained of her earlier agitation. For some reason Libby did not find this reassuring.

"Pull in over there," her mother said.

"At Coffeetime?"

"Sure."

"Is this where you're meeting . . . whoever?"

Again her mother turned to her. "Do I meddle in your private business?"

"All the time."


"That's different. I'm your mother."

Libby pulled into the lot of the shabby strip mall. "Do you want me to wait?"

"No, thanks."

"I'll be home in two hours in case you need a ride."

"That's why we have buses, but thank you. You're a good girl, Libby." Caroline Wolniecz opened the door and got out of the car. She went into the coffeeshop because it was where Libby expected her to



go. She even bought a small decaf with cream and a honey cruller. When the Toyota was out of sight, she left Coffeetime, dumped the food in a trash bin, and crossed the street to her real destination—Our Lady of Lourdes Cemetery.

Libby was late for the anti-oppression committee meeting because she stopped off at home and picked up the cannoli. She didn't believe for an instant that there was anything wrong with them, even if they had somehow precipitated her mother's second sight. Italian baked goods had been coming to the house for years, but Mom hardly ever ate them. When she asked why, her mother told her they were for unexpected company. After years of watching cakes and tarts and cookies go stale, Libby started taking them to the shelter. The women and children loved them.

Caroline wished she had thought of bringing her folding chair. There were no benches near the grave, and standing for more than a few minutes aggravated her swollen ankles. But with Libby's being there, she'd gotten muddled. She should have waited before opening the cannoli.

She looked around to make sure no one was nearby. Then she removed a hankie from her purse and dusted off the pink marble headstone that marked the graves of Giacobbe and Antonia Ferelli. It was a modest headstone considering the power that Giacobbe had once wielded. Then again he'd never been a flashy kind of man. His wife, too, was someone you'd hardly look at twice. Her fur coats were the talk of the town, but she reared her children in a Godfearing way and attended Mass every day.

"Hello, Giacobbe, it's me, la Carolina."

Apart from a slight rustle of the dogwoods there was no reply.

His silence didn't bother her. In fact, she had always admired his ability to listen. "I'll get straight to the point," she said, moving closer to the black and white miniature of a much younger Giacobbe. "Now, you know that in all the years we worked together I never once criticized your business. The gambling, the loansharking—the way I saw it, you were just providing a service. As for the things I didn't like, well, that's between you and God. But this son of yours, Fango, he's a horse of a different color. Always so angry, so scared."

It seemed to Caroline that the temperature had dropped. Maybe Giacobbe didn't like what he was hearing.

"I'm not saying it's your fault. Heaven knows, we try our best. But

what I saw in the cannoli, Giacobbe, was not mob business. It wasn't about unpaid loans or rival families moving in. This was something else, something cast up from the Devil himself, and you've got to help me stop it."

She sensed surprise and a whiff of disapproval. "I know, I know, it's not my job. I'm only supposed to see for the family, but I'm telling you, it's gone past that now. If you let this happen . . . if *we* let this happen, then we both deserve to burn in hell for all eternity. And from what I gather, you're not enjoying purgatory all that much."

She heard a chuckle and a slight cough.

"So you *are* listening. Good. Are you willing to help me or not?"

Sensing hesitation, she spread out her hands. "Look at me, Giacobbe, I'm an old woman. My kidneys are bad, my thyroid's acting up. If I go between Fango and his business, what's he gonna do, send his goons to ice me while I'm buying laxatives?"

You've been watching too many gangster movies.

Delighted to hear her old friend's voice, she laughed. "I never watch the new ones. It's all the F word."

How can I help you?

"I need to know who those bodies were and when they're supposed to die." Caroline waited, shifting painfully on swollen feet. "Are you still there, Giacobbe?"

I'm here.

"You can see it, too, can't you?"

Some things, Carolina, are best left alone.

"Don't you think I know that? But this isn't one of those things." A shudder ran through her, and she knew he agreed.

Even if I help you, there's still no guarantee.

"I'm not looking for guarantees."

Once again she felt a hesitation, and when the world fell silent, she thought he had changed his mind. Gone was the roar of passing trucks, the cheerful twitter of birdsong. She could hear no wind moving through the trees, no voices in her head, nothing. Then she caught on. When the silence had told her all she needed to know, Caroline Wolniec crossed herself, kissed Antonia's and Giacobbe's pictures, and took the Number 20 bus home.

Libby took a tray of coffee, juice, and cookies into the sunroom, where the new intake and her four children were waiting. The two boys were thirteen and ten; the girls, eight and seven. The oldest boy

looked the angriest, which was often the way. The middle ones sat staring at the floor, while the youngest played with her Barbie.

"Would you . . . uh, like me to take your coat?" Libby said to the woman, who was wearing a full-length mink, even though it was seventy degrees outside.

"No," she replied, pulling it tighter around her. "This was all I was able to take . . . and my rings, of course." She thrust out a manicured hand bejeweled with diamonds and emeralds.

"Yes, I see," Libby said, "they're lovely. You may want to consider storing those in our safe."

The woman was trying to look poised, but all the makeup and good posture in the world couldn't hide the lacerations beneath her blackened eye. "My husband said if I ever left him he'd cut me off without a cent. Do you think he'll do that?"

"I don't know your husband, Mrs. Smith, but the law does entitle you to fifty percent of marital assets."

"Are you sure he can't find us here? He has connections, you know."

Libby cast what she hoped was a reassuring glance at the children. "The shelter is a safe place. The police monitor the neighborhood regularly, and we have an excellent alarm system."

"I don't want to go on welfare. That's what I'll have to do, you know. I've never worked a day in my life."

"Craig," Libby said to the oldest boy, "why don't you take your brother and sisters to the TV room? If there's nothing on, you're welcome to watch a movie."

Without so much as a glance at his mother, Craig shambled out of the room, his three siblings following behind. They abandoned their juice, the cheap, bought cookies. Libby didn't blame them.

Blizzard sat on the kitchen table, something Caroline would never allow under ordinary circumstances. But a gun and a box of bullets were also on the table, and these were not ordinary.

Caroline hated guns—the noise, the stink, and everything else that went along with them. Her husband had insisted they keep one in the house, and after he died, she hadn't known what to do with it. Now, with trembling hands, she filled it with bullets.

Libby didn't sleep well that night. She supposed it was the coffee. After four hours of fretting and tossing, she phoned the shelter. The

night worker assured her everything was fine. All the women and children were sleeping.

Meetings with funders kept her away from the shelter until noon. When she finally got there, Libby checked the board. Mrs. Smith and her children were signed out.

"Debbie," she said to the support counselor, who was standing on a chair scrubbing cupboards. "Did Mrs. Smith say where she was going?"

"She said a meeting with her husband."

"Did she mention where?"

"No."

"What about a police escort?"

"We offered one, but she turned it down. Said they were meeting in a public place."

Libby nodded. "Okay."

There were no buses to the Green River Conservation Area, so Caroline took a cab, twenty dollars one way. She asked to be dropped off at the entrance booth. "I can drive you right in, if you'd like," the cabbie said. "It's quite a jaunt to the campsites."

"No, thanks, this is good enough." She took the fare from an outside pocket of her purse, so there was no chance of his seeing the gun. She got out of the taxi, watched him drive away.

A young man in a brown uniform came out of the entrance booth. "Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Good afternoon."

"How can I help you today?"

"My daughter and son-in-law are having a picnic by the river, and I was supposed to join them. Would you happen to know where they are?"

"We get a lot of people through here, ma'am."

"They would have come in two cars. Him in a black Oldsmobile and her and the four kids in a van."

The man scratched his head. "Forest green with an Orlando sticker?"


"That's the one."

"I remember because she asked about Talking Rock. That's probably where they were meeting."

"How far is that, do you think?"

"About half a mile."

Caroline had prepared herself with Nikes and support pantyhose



for the possibility of a hike, but when the young man offered a ride in his truck, she smiled gratefully. "If you're sure it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all. I'll just get my co-worker to look after the booth."

Bouncing along a tree-covered lane, Caroline felt her chest clench. It was the first case of nerves she'd had all day. "I wonder if you could drop me off just before Talking Rock," she said, trying to keep her voice calm. "I'd like to tease my son-in-law, let him think I walked the whole way."

The park ranger laughed. "Sure. I'll just pull up behind these cedars, then back out. He won't see a thing."

"You are so kind." After being helped out of the truck, Caroline opened her purse.

The man put out a hand, stopped her. "You have yourself a great day, y'hear?"

She breathed a prayer of relief. He probably wouldn't have seen anything, but it was too close a call all the same. "I will, thank you."

Caroline stood beneath towering cedars, wondering what to do next. "What's to wonder?" she muttered to herself. "I put one foot in front of the other."

Talking Rock was a twelve foot tall granite monolith with a bubbling internal spring. Caroline went up behind it, pressed herself against the rough surface, and waited for her breathing to settle. The Ferellis were on the other side of the rock; she could hear the children.

"This one's got mustard. I *hate* mustard."

"I'm not eating that. You *touched* it."

Slowly she moved sideways to peer around the rock. The scene was idyllic. A huge wicker basket, a bottle of wine, a red gingham cloth spread over two tables. The girls were sitting on one side, the boys on the other. Fango's wife was handing out submarine sandwiches.

Fango stood watching from the river's edge, to all appearances a doting father. When he reached into his coat, Caroline leaped out from her hiding place. "Don't make another move, Fango!"

His arms jerked outward. The others turned, equally astonished, to see an old woman pointing a pistol at their husband and father.

"Caroline, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I mean it, Fango. You reach into the coat, you'll never reach for anything again."

Smirking, he moved toward her. "You crazy old—"

The bullet zinged close enough to his feet that he realized she meant business. "Mrs. Ferelli," she said, "you need to get out of here. You and your kids, right now."

"Who are you?" the woman asked, putting a protective arm around one son.

"Never mind who I am." Caroline leaned against the cool granite for support and kept the gun pointed at Fango. "Just take my word for it, please. You and your children are not safe."

"Rico," she said, moving toward the husband who had blackened her eye. "This woman . . . can't you do something?"

"Sure, babe, don't you worry, I'll take care of it. Why don't you all get into the van?"

"What about the food?"

"Forget about the food, for crissake!"

"Come on, children." Mrs. Ferelli herded them, gape-mouthed, into the vehicle, leaving Caroline alone with Fango.

"I know what you were planning," she said, turning so the others couldn't read her lips. "You were going to kill your wife and children, then turn the gun on yourself."

"That's the biggest bunch of crap . . ."

"You couldn't stand the fact that she left you. How would it look to the rest of the family? A man can't even control his own wife."

"Why, you miserable, lying—"

The squeal of tires cut him off.

Caroline turned, saw the cherry-red Toyota, saw her daughter come flying through the door. "Look out, Mom!"

The bullet missed her left temple, hit Talking Rock, and ricocheted into Fango's throat. Everyone except Caroline saw his body hit the ground. She saw his spirit rise to Giacobbe and Antonia, who were waiting to embrace their son.

No charges were laid, even when the police learned that Caroline Wolniec had been working for the mob. A harmless old woman telling a few fortunes; thanks to her, they didn't have to worry about Ferelli any more.

Sandra Ferelli and the children moved to Colorado, where she graduated in commerce and opened a fur recycling business. Caroline doesn't use her second sight any more; she just sells flowers at the market and watches her cholesterol. As for Libby's psychic abilities, they never surfaced again, but she did place a call to the Royal City Bakery to keep the deliveries coming. □

HARRY'S GAME

Bentley
Dadmun

SILVER DOLLARS STOLEN FROM MADISON HALL

Dr. James T. Rockwell, chairman of State College's English department, announced on Tuesday afternoon that 309 silver dollars, donated by the English Department faculty over the previous 10 months, have vanished.

Kept in Dr. Rockwell's office, the coins were to be donated to the Silver Street Center for the elderly at 500 Silver Street upon reaching the goal of 500 silver dollars. Chief of Police Paul Krebs has hinted at an early arrest.

I pushed back from the microfiche machine, poured more coffee into my cup, and drank. Then I tweaked the dial and brought the next issue of the paper into view.

I had come to the library to pursue a line of thought that had been tugging at me. What was the town like during the war? I had no particular reason to want to know; it was just something I started dwelling on yesterday as I was lounging on the common watching the world go by. I was a youngster in 1943, the year of the theft, full of the fantasies and crap a boy of ten invariably is, and viewed the world through the skewed mind of the well-tended child.

So here I was, secreted in a dark corner of the library, drinking coffee and reading old edi-

tions of the local newspaper, getting the feel of life in a wartime New England village.

Dramatic stuff. One Lucy Coty was given a medal by the Board of Selectmen for donating her prized aluminum cookware to the war effort. Joseph Knox was fined forty dollars for trying to pass forged gas rationing tickets. And each week the editor intimated that if you didn't buy a bond or two you personally would lose the war for America.

I brought the next issue into focus. The three hundred nine silver dollars were still missing, and Chief Krebs was still hinting at an early arrest. The war effort definitely wanted all your metal, and printed in bold was a list of penalties for trying to cheat on ration tickets.

Norman Rogers, a janitor at the college, was reported missing by his brother Edmund.

I flipped to next week's issue. Chief Krebs was taking a lot of heat from various groups. Dr. James T. Rockwell said that perhaps the town should consider another chief. Ellen Crocker, head of Freshman Studies, stated that if the thief could not be found the town should reimburse the English Department.

The denizens of the Silver Street Center were not pleased with these events.

Norman Rogers was still missing. A check of his room at Miss

Gladys Morton's boardinghouse revealed that all his clothes and possessions were still in his room. Chief Krebs reported that his investigation had been fruitless. Nobody had a clue as to where Norman Rogers could have gone. But, Chief Krebs said, there was no evidence of foul play.

Four issues later the stories were gone, faded into history, replaced by details of wholesale slaughter in faraway places, pleas to buy bonds, and the doings of the garden club.

Sipping coffee, I reread the epic of the silver dollars. What had happened? Who stole the coins? Was it a premeditated act or perhaps one born of desperation? I capped my thermos, pushed away from the machine and 1943, and wandered off to engage in other timekillers.

After prowling through present day newspapers for an hour, I ambled out of the library, unlocked my mountain bike, put the seat back in, and coasted down the hill to the common.

The common is a pleasant circle of twenty or so stores with a small, elliptical, tree-choked park in the middle. I pedaled across Main Street, through the park and across Main Street again, and down a narrow dark alley.

Near the end of the alley in the right wall is an ugly, off-white, peeling door, a thick hunk of

leather screwed to it with a bunch of rusty sheetrock screws. Above the door is a faded wooden sign, and if I squint, I can just make out GRETCHEN'S RESTAURANT handprinted on the thing.

I grabbed the leather and pulled. Squealing like something from a bad movie, the door reluctantly opened, and pushing the bike ahead of me, I entered a long, narrow room with an ancient counter and mushroom-shaped stools on the left and six scarred, stained maple booths on the right. The wood floor creaked and groaned like senior sex as I walked along it. I leaned the bike against the back wall and plunked down on the end stool, the one with the wobble.

Gretchen, a gaunt, leathery woman with a long, seamed face, automatically put a pint bottle of Guinness Extra Stout in front of me and asked, "You eating?"

I shook my head, and Gretchen grunted, turned back to her stove and the special of the day, which, judging from the aroma that filled the room, was chicken curry. I downed a third of the stout, burped quietly, drank a bit more, and pondered the tale of the silver dollars.

Before I dropped out of Real Life, I taught history at the college for eleven years, from '76 to '87. I'd never heard any gossip about the coins. After the first

month the whole thing must have faded into the ether.

Too bad. The story seemed a great catalyst for a legend, one that would become a part of every child's repertoire. But obviously that didn't happen. Perhaps all the imagination had been sent off to foreign lands to kill or die, leaving behind stilted, rigid minds to deal with homefront stuff.

For a while I slipped into neutral, drinking stout and thinking nothing, only dimly aware of the comings and goings around me. I spend a lot of time at Gretchen's, often wandering in two, three times a day. We have a ritual, Gretchen and I. The first time I arrive, usually around ten in the morning, she plunks down a mug of coffee, smiles, and fires up one of her cigarettes. I take a sip of coffee and ask what's new in the world. Gretchen, who knows all, then tells me the latest follies the locals have indulged in, and thus I am informed. Occasionally, when she's in a good mood, I reciprocate by relating a bit of history. But it has to be a short bit. Gretchen says history is a tale told by used car salesmen.

A rasping, noxious coughing brought me out of neutral and back to reality. Three seats down a geezer blew something I didn't want to see into a blue silk handkerchief which he then stuffed into the pocket of a threadbare

black suit coat. He wore a black hat of the style my dad wore in the fifties, and as I watched, he took it off and placed it on the counter just so.

He was a thin, pale old guy with thick blue lips and wet gray eyes that hinted at some aptitude. When Gretchen looked at him, he smiled and said in a clear strong voice, "Curried chicken, house salad, cold piss."

Gretchen set a bottle of beer in front of him. He looked at me and raised the bottle in salute. I raised mine and smiled back. "To age," he said, "surely the great joke of the gods."

"It's a joke I'm not laughing at," I said. "I get frightened thinking about the punchline."

"You surpris   me, sir. I would have thought a historian, even a lapsed historian, would appreciate that death is nature's reward for a life well lived."

"Some reward. You know me, from where?"

"The college. I taught, rather tried to teach, physics to a never-ending flock of usually mediocre striplings who were mainly concerned with frothy brews and the scent of feminine flesh. I am Morton Anderson, professor of physical science."

"How long were you at the school?"

"Started as a lad of thirty in '41. Retired as an embittered coot in '81."

I immediately asked, "What happened to the three hundred nine silver dollars?"

Dr. Anderson looked at me with those deep, wet eyes and said, "I have no idea. And at that time, in the middle of the great slaughter, there was no one left competent enough to find out." With a trembling hand he raised his bottle and drank deeply of the "cold piss." "I would like to think that those verbose hooligans in the English department snatched it from the drooling jaws of those unworthy coots at the Center and used it to finance fun and frolic."

I smiled, finished my stout, waved the bottle at Gretchen, and pointed at Dr. Anderson. Gretchen gave us both fresh bottles to suck on and returned to her curry. Anderson nodded his thanks. "In truth," he said, "it wouldn't surprise me if one of the English department did abscond with the loot. At that time they were a shallow lot and certainly up to it. Rockwell was a smiling sinner of whom it could be said the lights are on, but there's nobody home. It is to the planet's advantage that he stroked in '44. Perhaps after spending ill-gotten dollars."

Dr. Anderson then seemed to drift away. He stared at the wall and absently sipped his beer. I turned back to my stout, wondered if I was up to the ride home, and realized that if I didn't

want to sleep in the park I really had no choice.

"Ellen Crocker was another one."

"Pardon me?"

"Ellen Crocker. Freshman Studies, English Department. Shallow." He snorted like a confused old dog. "She would smile, use her eyes and her body to tease men into doing things for her. Usually got her way, it seemed."

"She beguile you?" I asked.

"No, sir. We'd been in school together since the sixth grade when her family moved here from Boston. To be honest I don't think she ever tried. Wouldn't have worked; even back then I was smitten with the fair Sarah Farnum, who as we speak is gossiping with friends not three blocks from here.

"Ellen worked her way with Norman, though. All through the eighth grade that poor lad, who wasn't too bright to begin with, followed her around like a bonded duckling. Then Ellen's family decided that Norman wasn't quite the material they wanted for their little girl."

"Listen," I said, "would that have been Norman Rogers?"

"Yes, sir."

"I understand he was a janitor at the college."

"That is correct. Norman was a nice enough lad but a little dim."

"Then why would an intellectu-

al type like Ellen Crocker bother to pursue him?"

Dr. Anderson drank some beer, carefully set his bottle down, and smiled.

"Actually her name is Hughes now, married and left the poor bastard in less than a year. Rumor said she took every dollar he ever made. At any rate, Norman may have been a little dim, but I understand he compensated with an excess of testosterone. Lust and a certain rough charm seemed to have been his forte."

I live on a farm. In a pasture. The farm is owned by a crusty retired veterinarian named Annie who has turned it into a home for destitute senior citizens; those of us who lacked the forethought or the persistence to provide for our golden years. The farm's a cooperative, the idea being that everyone contributes to the whole. I guess in the long run it works out, but being an iron-assed loner, I try not to coop too much with my fellow geezers.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Annie angling toward me as I pedaled to the barnyard gate, and increased speed in the hope of eluding her.

Her raspy voice cut the air like a cruise missile. "Harry, stop for a moment."

About twenty of the coop live in the barn. The rest reside in old trailers and mobile homes stuck

haphazardly in the surrounding pastures. To heat every structure for one winter takes sixty cords of wood. It's nice that it's free. It's a shame that the trees have to be cut, limbed, split, hauled out of the woods, and stacked in the big wood room on the ground floor of the barn. It's a tragedy that I'm the one who does all this and other wood-working jobs as well, all so I can keep my Social Security check for myself instead of handing most of it over to her as everyone else does.

Annie ran a hand through her gray hair. "That goddamn eave has to be rebuilt this week. The rain runs down the walls and into the apartments." She stared at me as if I were a bit addled even to think of protesting, gave a curt little nod of her head, and walked away.

I considered an obscene gesture, but Annie has eyes in the back of her head and I'd just have to listen to another round of authoritative claptrap.

Instead I yelled, "Annie," and walked across the barnyard to her. "You've been a lifelong resident of this area. Ever hear of Ellen Crocker—or Ellen Hughes?"

"Of course. She used to teach at the college. English, I think. I didn't know her personally, she was about five years older than me."

"Ever hear anything?"

"I seem to recall that until she aged men loved her and women hated her."

"Ever hear of Norman Rogers?"

"Norman Rogers?"

"He was a janitor at the college. Disappeared in '43."

"I remember now. Just vanished. Everything still in his room at a boardinghouse. He was a little backward. People assumed he just left town."

"I talked to an old guy in town who said Ellen and Norman were an item in the eighth grade."

"More than the eighth grade. I used to take extension courses at the college, and I remember once seeing them huddled under the back door roof of Jefferson Hall. Ellen had a hand on his leg . . . his upper leg."

"When was this?"

"Oh Christ, it must have been in 1940 or '41."

"Ever hear anything about the theft of some coins from the English Department?"

"Of course. It was big news for a while, took our minds off the war and who was getting killed. If I remember correctly, the culprit was never found." She scrutinized my face with the same intensity with which she inspected the barn and said, "You're up to something, Harry. You've got that quixotic look in your eye. Don't let it interfere with work."

Yes, Mother.

I walked the bike to the pas-

ture gate, wrestled the goddamn thing open, pushed the bike through, and got the beast shut again. After fishing my mail out of the tin box wired to the gate I set off across the field.

I live in the middle of a grove of maples and oaks, in the middle of the south pasture. And in the middle of the grove, cradled in a wood and fiberglass frame, is a thirty-six foot mahogany sloop. It lacks mast, keel, and some other stuff needed for sailing the seven seas, but I'm happy with it. I'm away from the maddening horde of coots and don't have to mow a lawn, chat over a fence with a neighbor, or flirt with his two hundred pound wife. All I do is feed the birds and squirrels, patch the occasional dry rot, and watch out for cowpats.

I left my bike in the sagging lean-to I'd built between two maples, climbed aboard, opened the hatch, and dropped into the main cabin. With a mug of Extra Stout firmly in hand, I slumped down on the settee and stared out the window at the evening frenzy around the birdfeeders I'd placed at the edge of the clearing.

Okay. Ellen Crocker and Norman Rogers knew each other. Didn't mean they were seeing each other in '43. And it certainly didn't mean they had anything to do with the missing coins.

Still.

I wondered if Ellen Hughes

was still living. She'd be what? Seventy-nine? Eighty? If she was still alive, did she live in town? I poured more stout and made a note in my little book. Any relatives of Norman's still around? His brother Edmund?

Head bent into the cold rain the gods were kind enough to provide, I pedaled the seven miles to town. I've pedaled a bicycle around for several years now, taking pride in the fact that, rain, shine, snow, or whatever, there I would be, pedaling my way into hard-core self-reliance.

I was pretty pleased with myself until one of Gretchen's regulars, a coot of seventy or so, said that it seemed to her that I was more than a little stupid.

Over my first coffee of the day Gretchen informed me that not a goddamn thing worth mentioning had happened in our "sorry little burg." So I asked for the telephone book and looked up Hughes and Rogers.

Sixteen Rogerses were listed in the directory. An E. Rogers was there. I called, and a hesitant, quivering voice invited me over for a cup of tea.

"Over" turned out to be just outside of town on a dirt road that ended at a small, unpainted house built of barn boards and tarpaper. It was old three months after it was built.

I laid the bike in tall dead weeds, climbed crumbling cement block steps, and knocked on a sad door made of plywood and two by fours. Inside, a television was screaming something about relief.

The door opened, and I faced a short, fat old man with a round fuzzy head and a pasty bland face that looked as if it had to be glued on every morning. He belched and said, "You the fellow on the phone?"

I nodded, smiled, held out my hand, and said, "Good morning, my name is Harry."

He nodded, didn't smile, didn't shake my hand, and said, "Morning. Edmund Rogers. Come on in and have some tea." He turned and shuffled back into the house. His left shoulder hung about six inches lower than his right, and his left arm flopped about like a wet sock on a line.

I entered a small square living room packed with cheap sixties-era furniture and cluttered with piles of magazines. Most of the magazines pertained to history, and I thought, Harry, don't tell this guy you're a historian.

Edmund took a pile of Civil War magazines off a lopsided, lumpy chair the color of sewer water and said, "Sit."

I did. He shuffled into a tiny kitchen, futzed around, and came out with two glasses of red stuff that looked suspiciously

like wine. He handed me a glass and collapsed into a sagging sofa that needed serious work.

"You used to be at the college, didn't you?"

Damn. Think quick. "Ahh, yes. I taught . . . math. Freshman math mostly." I took a tentative sip of the red stuff in my glass. Wine, definitely wine. Probably cost two or three dollars a gallon.

Edmund gave a small, tired smile. "Thought so. I used to work there, too. Janitorial."

"That's why I called you. I happened to be looking at some old newspapers from the war and read about your brother's disappearance. I got a little curious and thought I'd see if anybody ever found out what happened to him."

Edmund's eyes glazed over and focused on infinity, and I realized that my statement had punched him back to 1943. Finally he blinked and said, "You caught me by surprise. Hadn't thought of Norman for some time. Used to be a day, an hour wouldn't go by that I didn't think of him."

I sipped some of the ghastly wine, tried for a smile that was understanding, and said, "I take it the police never found out anything."

Edmund snorted and shook his head in disgust. "Paul Krebs was chief back then. Stayed out of War Two 'cause he had a piece of shrapnel in his skull from War

One. That son-of-a-bitch couldn't find his ass if he used both hands."

"How about you? Any ideas?"

"I must have gave a thousand hours of thought to that. I mean, Jesus! I saw him that morning. Had coffee with him down at Gretchen's, called Helen's then, she was Gretchen's ma. I was home on leave on account of I got shot by a Jap sniper. Aimed for my head, got my shoulder." He stared at the floor and slowly nodded. "Then he's gone. Like he got abducted by them aliens or something."

I drank, almost finishing the wine until I realized he would offer me another glass of the stuff. "I had a beer with an old guy and mentioned all this to him," I said. "He said Norman used to date a girl named Ellen Crocker back in eighth grade."

"That he did, that he did. One thing about Norman, he wasn't the smartest dandy to walk down the road, but . . . well, there was something about him. Certain women, women like that Crocker dame, couldn't stay away. Used to get me riled. Him getting all that and me not. And let me tell you something, Harold, old Ellen didn't quit in the eighth grade like her parents wanted. Before he disappeared? In '43? Before that, maybe a week or so, I saw them in Jefferson Hall down in the janitor's room. Walked in.

They jumped apart like cats hit with water, her dress dropped back down, and there they stood, both redfaced and smiling like snakes." He drank his wine, shook his head, and drank again. "Three, four days later he was gone. Two months after that I had his job."

Ellen Hughes lived in an elegant Victorian house painted a dull yellow with deep green trim. It sprouted gables and porches like my sister sprouted lies.

Since I was near the high school, I hauled my bike up on her porch, laid it down on polished wood, and chained it to the handcarved rail. I whacked the ornate oak door six times with a brass lion's head knocker that must have weighed four pounds. Two or three whacks would have sufficed, but I liked the heft of the thing.

A plump, middle-aged woman dressed in dull browns answered the door. She had a placid face saved by large brown eyes that hinted of suppressed intelligence and passion. Or perhaps they just shone for no special reason and I put the other stuff there. She raised one eyebrow, her left, along with a palm, her right, and said, "Is there something you want or do you just like to beat the hell out of doors?"

Sarcasm, that's what her eyes

shone with . . . sarcasm. I burst into a smile and said, "Good afternoon, my name is Harry. I wonder if I could speak with Ellen Hughes."

I waited for her reply, but just as she got her mouth open, an iron voice behind her said, "Susan? Do we have a guest? Who is it?"

The light in Susan's eyes blinked out, and her shoulders slumped a bit. "It's a man, Mother. A man named Harry, and he wants to speak with you."

Like a bundle of worms, dead white fingers wrapped around Susan's upper arm and pulled her out of the way, revealing a trim, once handsome woman whom I knew to be at least seventy-nine or eighty but who didn't look a day over eighty-five. She was dressed in a black silk pants suit that highlighted and enhanced her pale, lumpy face. The million tiny wrinkles and lines, the turkey neck, the bags, the wet, rheumy eyes, all made me think of things to come. I had a flicker of another Harry, one twenty years from now, that took effort to shove back into the depths.

I forced a smile. "Yes, I'd like to talk to you about 1943 and the three hundred nine silver dollars."

Something rippled across her eyes; then she smiled, reached out to touch my arm, said, "My

goodness, so long ago. Please come in, ah, Harry. We'll have a glass of wine and chat."

Susan gave her mother a peck on the cheek and in a dull voice said, "I'm going. Perhaps I'll see you later in the week. If you need anything, call." As she brushed past me, she looked at me, rolled her eyes, and clomped down the front steps.

Ellen Hughes led me along a dark paneled hallway into a big well-lit room that had a solarium built into the outside wall. The solarium was a jungle, a tangled mass of green punctuated by an occasional blob of red and yellow. The room was warm and humid and smelled like a greenhouse in need of work.

She gestured at a highbacked gray leather chair. "Do you have a preference in wines, Harry?"

As I sank into soft, cushiony leather I said, "Red."

She stared down at me a moment, then went to an elaborately carved minibar made of brushed golden oak and handed me a rock crystal glass full of a light red liquid that I knew was going to be a touch of heaven. Perching on the edge of the middle cushion of a fifteen foot gray leather couch, she said, "I haven't thought of those coins for years. However did you hear of them?"

I sipped my wine. Definitely not the three bucks a gallon stuff

that Edmund drank. "This is excellent. What kind is it?"

She pursed her lips in irritation, waved a jeweled hand heavy with bulbous veins, and said, "Oh, I don't know, some kind of rosé, obviously."

Just to see if I could push a button, I plodded on. "Does your husband buy it? Perhaps I could ask him."

That got me a moment's cold stare. Through the white, wattled flesh I could see her jaw muscles pump. "Gerald and I have been divorced for many years. Now, I asked, how did you happen to hear about the coins?"

I launched into my story once more. "I was scrolling through the wartime editions of the local paper and came across the story. It was front page news for four weeks, then died. I assume they weren't recovered?"

"You assume correctly. Being an historian, you would muck about in the past, wouldn't you?"

Jesus Christ! Was I known by the entire world? Okay. She's seventy-nine, eighty. Retired fifteen years ago? Hell yes! This old gal was still in the English department when I was teaching history to groups of beer-swilling students who should have been slaving in coal mines.

"Living in the past, even dwelling on the past, is still one of my favorite diversions," I said.

"It would be. People who lack

the fortitude to live in society often seek refuge in the past. Or some fantasy pertaining to the future, an idealized future, of course."

Stung, but not mortally, I staggered on. "Perhaps. Your name was mentioned several times," I said. "Obviously you were close to the project. Surely you must have some inkling of what happened to them."

"Actually, I had little to do with it. The coins were kept in an adjoining office. I sometimes collected and counted them as they came in, usually a day or two after we were paid. But generally I didn't have any more to do with the project than any other member of the English department."

"Members of the English department had the greatest opportunity to steal the coins. Any ideas?"

"None. Now this is beginning to sound like an interrogation. You surely don't think that *I'm* the guilty party and deprived those dear old ladies of their money."

I sipped a bit of ambrosia. "Of course not. It's just that so few of the principals are still alive and thus available to talk with."

"Well, I suggest you look harder because I don't dwell on the past. It is action, action in the present, that matters, that is life."

"True enough. Allow me to ask one more question. I noticed an-

other oddity while reading about the theft. The day after the crime, Norman Rogers disappeared, never to be heard from again. Any ideas on that?"

Again that ripple across her eyes, like a jab to the id. She smiled, took a minuscule sip of wine, and said, "Norman Rogers. My goodness I haven't thought of him in . . . oh, it must be thirty years."

"I understand you and he were a item in the eighth grade."

"Now, wherever did you hear that, Harry?"

"In a bar."

"Of course, where else? Yes, I was, ah, infatuated with Norman for a time. He was strong, tough. I think I must've thought he represented all that was good in a man. Of course I was only thirteen and knew little of the world. Fortunately, my parents intervened and ended the relationship."

My glass was empty. I wanted more, but I knew that if I asked I would be met with an invitation to depart. So I shoved my desire to the back of my mind to lie with my fears, stared into those bright little eyes, and said, "So you never, ah, dallied with Norman again?"

"We never dallied at all. I may have been young and naive, but I wasn't stupid. It was 1930, not now, when the majority of young people would, and probably do,

fornicate with anything that walks." She stood up. "As interesting as this has been, I must ask you to leave. I have been invited out to dinner and need to prepare."

"Of course. If you think of anything else, would you let me know? I can leave you a number to call."

She stood absolutely motionless, like a lizard waiting for a fly. Finally she blinked, gave me a well-chilled smile, and said, "No, you may not. To repeat, I do not dwell in the past."

"You live in the present, where the action is."

"Correct."

I leaned the bike against a scarred maple and sat on the warm earth with my back against the tortured tree. The bark had been ripped off and the raw wood carved on. In my day there would have been such things as *John loves Mary*, *RT loves TY*, or some such harmless nonsense. This maple had *John's a faggot*, *Julie sucks dogs*, and other lines of wisdom proving once again that the human race needs a bath.

So I leaned against the dying maple, drank Guinness from the bottle, and wondered. In mid-wonder I saw my ex-wife and her second husband come out of the town's very own Subway. I watched the two of them—short, round, expensively dressed, their

pudgy hands intertwined and no doubt sweating as they lumbered down the street and into Shaw's Deli. They saw me and whispered unflattering epigrams out of the corners of their pulpy mouths. Or at least I assumed insults. One never knows. You see your ex-husband drinking beer under a tree in the center of town, and you might say, "Harry's looking quite good this afternoon, what?"

They came out of Shaw's laden with bags, and I knew another feast was in order. This one in the privacy of home. Her home, once my home, and gladly abandoned years ago when I realized that Sartre was right: Hell is other people.

I pondered and drank and when the third Guinness was gone decided I'd better mount my steed and head home now or I'd have to build a nest under the gazebo and settle in for the night.

The ride was uneventful. The big knobby tires turning on the blacktop produced a lulling hum that put me in a semi-trance, and suddenly I was bouncing through the barnyard. On the second floor of the barn is a dining area and lounge and I considered going up and having supper, but common sense prevailed and I wrestled with the goddamn gate, retrieved my mail, and fled to the grove and sanctuary.

Over a can of lentil soup, a PowerBar, and a handful of sup-

plements, I read the mail, usually an exercise in waste management and tonight, as always when I get my Social Security check, a good solid opportunity to depress myself.

For the nth time I sat in the gloom of candlelight and toyed with the idea of giving Annie the money and not doing wood. And as I toyed, I did what I always do when I get my official "Harry's old" certification, I went to the tiny bathroom and gazed at myself in the mirror. I checked the lines, the seams, the hollows, gray hair cut so short that my skull glowed dimly through it in certain lights, and then, nicely depressed, I returned to the settee and popped the cap on another bottle of stout. Sixty-three years old. What the hell happened? Where did my life go? In a few more blinks I will look like Ellen Hughes. In a few blinks after that, I will be gone. And no one will care, no one will know.

My mahogany cave echoing with dramatic groans and grunts, I shuffled off to bed. Poor me. As I eased into sleep, I wondered: Dear Ellen . . . what did you do with Norman Rogers?

Two poached eggs on dry wheat toast, coffee, and ice cold milk. I ate, paid Gretchen, who had little to report in the way of gossip, left my bike against the wall, and

sauntered up the hill to the college.

Jefferson Hall, along with Madison Hall, was built around the turn of the century. Eighteen ninety-nine is carved in stone above the wide, tall double doors. It is a fine old building. Four stories of red brick and polished wood reeking with tradition and tolerance. Jefferson Hall still sports its original large arched windows and in the southwest corner a bell tower.

Joining an ingoing tide of students I was pulled through the doors and up four steps to the hall of the first floor. Immersed in a sea of youth, babble, and garish colors, I allowed myself to be drawn along, up wide wood stairs to the second floor, along the length of the hall, up to the third, down the hall, and up to the fourth floor.

Halfway down the corridor of the fourth floor I drifted past room 412. My old classroom. I felt no tug, no yearning, just the heavy sadness of years gone.

No one paid any attention to me, the old guy, and by the time I traipsed back to the first floor, the classrooms were full, the halls empty. The new janitor's room was on the second floor. A large room crammed with the paraphernalia of the trade. But I remembered that the old room was in the basement.

On the first floor beneath the

staircase is a narrow, unlabeled, windowless door. As I had seen janitors do from time to time in my tenure in this building, I ran my hand along the top of the door casing, found a rusty skeleton key, used it, found a light switch, and descended wide, filthy stairs into a silent world heavy with gloom and dust.

A wood and cement cavern, dark and foreboding with musty-smelling air that I could almost see. Inching along, guided by one bare bulb hanging from a socket Edison must have used, I wandered into the past.

That door was a time machine, a direct route to the world of the forties. The hall was crammed with stacks of books covered with multiple layers of grit, dead insects, and mouse droppings. With a slightly trembling hand I turned ornate doorknobs, forced open doors that squealed and creaked, stuck my head into storage rooms, and held my breath while I stared at artifacts no longer needed for the sacred high art of teaching.

At the other end of the basement I found a lone door with a small board nailed to it at head height. With the back of my hand I rubbed away cobwebs and dust and read the crude, handwritten letters: JANITOR'S ROOM.

With effort I got the door open and turned the switch, igniting a dirt-encrusted bulb hanging at

least three feet down from the ceiling.

Like a museum diorama, Norman Rogers' room was a silent, cold visit to another time. Directly across from the door was a handsome wood desk and matching chair that, if restored, CEO's would fight for. Beside the desk was an overstuffed chair that might have once been covered with leather but now was a well-established home for several generations of small furry critters. Beside the chair was a square table with a 1930's vintage coffee pot and two matching ceramic cups and saucers. In a wooden tray were two forks, two spoons, and one knife, all with the same mother-of-pearl handles. I picked up the knife and rubbed grit off the handle, and it seemed to glow with its own inner force.

Along the far wall was a narrow wooden bed. The bed was made up, with two pillows and sheets that might have been pink folded back over a thick wool blanket of the type the U.S. Army is fond of giving out. Everything was covered with dust, mildew, and droppings.

A series of holes marched along one wall, across a third of the ceiling, did a ninety degree turn, and marched into the outside wall. A metal door maybe half the size of a normal door was under the holes.

Curious. Where would it go? I

pulled the bed away and peered at the strange door. It was fixed to the cement wall with four large bolts, one at each corner. The bolts were rusted all to hell and would require an act of God to turn.

I gave the door three raps with a knuckle. It sounded as if I had quietly thunked a kettledrum.

What the hell?

Another room? Why seal it up? A tunnel? For what purpose?

The room started to vibrate slightly, dust fell like mist, and a dull rumble came from above. Classes had ended, and the students were rushing out, books clasped to chests or crammed into bags, to seek other rooms, or to escape to the Union to engage in unrelenting yammering.

I stood in the center of Norman Rogers' domain and waited until all was quiet again. Then I turned off the light, shut the door, and made my way back to the late twentieth century.

At Gretchen's I filled my thermos, claimed my bike, and headed for the library. In a deserted corner I put a yellowed, brittle roll of paper down on a large oak table, filled my cup, sipped, did a theatrical "ahhhhh," and set the cup aside. Habit bowed to, I carefully unrolled the paper and anchored it at each corner with the library's four copies of Matthews' *Ethics of Business*. The barely readable label on the outside

said, "Operating Plan for Construction: Jefferson Hall. Madison Hall. Submitted 15 October 1896. Copy Sixteen."

Copy Sixteen was faded, poorly drafted, littered with scribbled comments and even a black, smudged fingerprint from that grand year. But it didn't matter. Even without my glasses I saw it. Leading from a central boiler room north of Jefferson Hall, into Jefferson Hall, then to Madison Hall, were multiple lines labeled STEAM PIPES. And they were carried underground.

A tunnel. There was a god-damn tunnel connecting the two buildings.

I rolled the plan up again, tucked it into its slot, slurped down the last of my coffee, and made my retreat. A tunnel. Damn.

I looked at my watch and grunted in surprise. Only eleven thirty. I had been ready to pedal back to the farm for a little stout, a little reading, and an early turn-in. Nothing like action, action in the present and with purpose, to slow down time, to put a hard finger on boredom. Kudos to you, Ellen Hughes.

At Young's Hardware, skulking up and down the aisles like a commando, darting across open areas, hiding behind pillars of junk only hardware buffs would love, I grabbed several items and moved to the cash register.

Jeffery Young is the world's fastest, longest, and dumbest talker. He patrols the aisles like a nervous pigeon, looking for victims. Once he nails you, it's thirty minutes of hell, of ever-increasing tension that puts your heart in a liquid vise. Only Jeffery Young's relatives will work for him. I trotted to the checkout, flopped my purchases down, and waited apprehensively while Jeffery's forty-year-old, three hundred pound son slowly lasered bar codes. Finally I slapped money on the counter, grabbed my stuff, and bolted.

With my new green and white bookbag on my back I dashed through heavy rain to Jefferson Hall. Once again I allowed myself to be carried along with the human tide ascending the floors, and for the second time that day drifted past my old classroom.

When the halls were quiet, I slipped through the magic door.

I locked myself in Norman's room, yanked back the blanket, and put my bookbag on the bed. Then I pulled out my purchases and lined them up neatly on the faded pink sheet: a large crescent wrench, a can of penetrating oil, a flashlight, batteries, a flatbar. I sprayed each rusted nut with the penetrating oil, slathering the stuff on until it ran down the wall. Then I sat on the musty bed and waited.

A tiny mouse ventured out from the desk and stopped under the light. The critter reared up on its hind legs and, ears twitching, studied me. I jerked my hand, and it scampered back under the desk, undoubtedly to report the terrible news. "It's back!"

I put the wrench over the upper left nut, adjusted it, got the angle where I could apply the most leverage, braced, and with both hands yarded down on it. After several moments of silent struggle the nut squealed and broke loose, and I took it off and dropped it on the bed. After three more epic battles with the forces of oxidation I jammed my flatbar between the door and the wall and pulled. The door popped off, fell against the bed, and crashed to the floor.

Blocks of wet air laden with throat-clutching odors fell into the room. I got out, hurried down the hall, and waited in a dark corner like a trapped animal for the foul air to disperse and someone to investigate the noise.

I gave it ten minutes. Then I crept back into Norman's room and up to the black hole I'd created. The air was a little better, but I had the sensation of breathing in something foul, something that was going to harm me. A constant background noise, like putting your ear to a shell and hearing the ocean, came from the

tunnel. But the noise was welcome, for the tunnel was a black, forbidding thing that both repelled and beckoned.

My light revealed a cave of crumbling cement that curved gently to the right. Rows of heavily corroded iron brackets hung from the ceiling. Aha. That's what the holes in Norman's ceiling were, brackets for the old steam pipes.

I put the flatbar and wrench in the bookbag, slung it over my shoulder, ducked my head, and stepped into the tunnel.

Creeping along, my feet crunching on small piles of metal and broken cement, my light jabbing at imagined terrors, I sank deeper into it.

I came upon a section of the wall on my left that was cracked and broken. Thick, greasy roots protruded into the tunnel, like grotesque snakes looking for prey. I pressed against the opposite wall and eased past them. Black-water dripped constantly from minute cracks in the ceiling. I came upon a pool of water coated with a thick gray film. It took a while, but I finally managed to take the dozen or so steps through the slime and carried on. The ocean noise was gone, and now I was wrapped in a foul silence that clung like wet wool.

I loved it.

Ellen Hughes was right. Action, with purpose, focuses the

mind, making the nervous system cackle with glee.

Fairly confident now, I walked along with a hunched-over gait, my light bouncing ahead of me, pointing out puddles, deformed roots, hanging pieces of iron, and layers of fetid mildew and slime.

I reached a series of three doors built into the wall and remembered that they were used for storage of replacement pipe and brackets. And farther on, maybe thirty feet, I faced the twin of the door I had removed at Jefferson. Madison Hall, scene of the crime, once-proud domain of the English department, now a storage facility for the athletic department.

So what had I accomplished? Proved that back in '43 it was a piece of cake to walk underground from Norman Rogers' building to Ellen Crocker's building. And I had given myself a bit of excitement. I was sorry it had ended, for the keen sense of adventure was a welcome relief from the pushing of self through dull, repetitive days.

I started back. Perhaps I could get into Madison Hall and trace the route from James T. Rockwell's office down to the tunnel. It wouldn't solve anything, but it would allow me to play the game a bit longer.

I stopped at the wooden doors of the parts bins and pried them open. They were heavy and soft

with moisture and rot. I poked about with the flashlight beam. They were empty, not even a "Kilroy was here" written on the walls, just corrosion and decay.

I shuffled along slowly, pausing here and there to turn off the light and let it all seep in. It excited me to know that above my head life went on, oblivious to the fact that I alone was wandering through a forgotten underground world, a misplaced piece of history. I felt close to unique, one of the few who've found that game worth playing. A deception, of course, but what the hell.

Wait a minute.

I froze in the middle of a puddle, the picture vivid in my mind's eye. I turned around and walked back toward Madison.

I reached the storage bins and once again eased open those wet, rotting doors, inhaled the dark odors, and, again, this time carefully, ran my flashlight over the walls.

The first and last bins were solid concrete. And so was the middle one except for a two by five outline in the middle of the back wall. I had missed it the first go-round because of the mottled growths that covered the walls like a malignant ivy. Like a child touching a snake, I reached out and pressed my finger against the odd piece. It was like sticking my finger into wet dirt. It easily poked through, and I bent my fin-

ger and pulled, creating a fist-sized hole. Wood, not concrete. It was a goddamned door.

I went at it with the flatbar and in a minute had a rank pile of moldy wood scattered about the bin. I was breathing like an asthmatic goat, and my jaw ached from the tight grin etched on my face.

Behind the door was a shallow niche, a tiny closet, for what I don't know, for it wasn't drawn on Copy Sixteen. A skeleton, stained black and gray and hung with bits of black, rotted clothing, lay at the bottom of the closet. With the flatbar I poked about, moving bone, asking silent questions.

Below the ribcage, nestled in a pile of small bones and ooze that had once been clothing, was a knife, its blade heavily corroded, but the curving, mother-of-pearl handle lay serene and innocent, the glowing light at the end of my tunnel.

And spilling out of a thoroughly decayed briefcase was a pile of round, black objects.

I walked away from Norman Rogers' crypt, found a dry place near the sealed door to Madison Hall, sat down, leaned my back against the cement, and turned off the light. I sat there in the rank, thick dark letting it seep into my skin. I was a rat in its lair, its hole.

Ellen Hughes pulled open that imposing door and gave me the kind of look people reserve for child molesters. Then she sighed dramatically and said, "I do not think I can add any more to your little quest, and I really do not have the time to engage in idle chit-chat with you."

I smiled. What the hell, I was holding an ace or two, I could afford to grin in the face of flagrant insults.

"You do want to talk to me, Mrs. Hughes, for it is I . . . who can add a great deal to the mystery."

I endured another bout of hard stares and chilly silence. I shifted the bookbag a bit higher on my shoulder and stared back. Finally Ellen Hughes executed a snap-py about-face and marched down the hall. Again she was attired in dark silk. A deep gray this time, and her white hair was swept up and back in a tight wave. But the silk couldn't hide the merciless tip-tip-tapping of time. Her gait was that of a little old lady, and once again I had a flicker of what lay ahead. When we were seated—she perched on the couch, me on the chair—I said, "A glass of wine would be nice."

Faint pink spots appeared on her cheeks and grew like spilled juice across her face. Slowly she stood, rubbed her hands, went to the bar, and poured me a glass of

wine. When she handed it to me, I smiled and said, "Thank you."

"You said you have something. Something pertaining to the theft of those coins."

"More than that, Mrs. Hughes." I drank some wine, and the cool liquid dropped like lard into my gut and my heart danced the dance of idiots.

Between us was an oval coffee table of some light wood I didn't recognize. I opened the bookbag and, one by one, put the pearl-handled knife, two tarnished silver dollars, and Norman Rogers' skull in a neat line in the center of the table. Then I sat back and waited.

Ellen Hughes stared down at my little display. When her eyes finally rose to mine, I smiled and said, "Curiosity. It just might kill a cat."

In a voice that was somewhere between a hiss and a whisper she said, "What do you intend to do?"

"I intend to listen to what you have to say."

"You silly fool. I intend to say nothing. What you have here are objects, objects easily obtained. Certainly nothing of value to a district attorney."

I leaned forward and tried for a cold, knowing smile. "You and Norman dallied well past the eighth grade. I have a witness who watched you cuddle by the back door of Jefferson Hall. Norman's brother caught the two of

you in the janitor's room in '43, just before the theft. I've walked the tunnel, I've found the coins, I've found Norman's remains, I've found the knife you used to stab him. Indeed, Ellen, I have plenty to interest a district attorney."

She pushed herself to her feet, swayed a bit, then shuffled to the bar and poured about three ounces of scotch into a rock crystal glass. After a moment's hesitation, she forced it down; the flesh under her neck flopped about like a dying bird. She poured another stiff drink and sat back down. Her face simmered pink, and those hard, gimlet eyes glistened with a blatant fear.

"I was in dire need of money. The coins were there for the taking. To donate them to the Center, which was quite solvent, was ludicrous. We simply walked through the tunnel into Madison Hall and into James's office. It was late afternoon. I remember the coins were quite heavy. I hadn't thought of that. When we got back to the janitor's room, Norman began to panic." She sipped the scotch, then pressed the glass into her lap with both hands and held it there. For a minute she was quiet, then she inhaled sharply and returned to the present.

"Such a little boy. A silly little boy. He insisted we go back and replace the coins before they were

missed. I told him no. I must have the money. He said he had four hundred dollars in his room. If we returned the silver dollars, he would give me the four hundred.

"I said no, and when he turned to go into the tunnel, I picked up one of the table knives and stabbed him. I missed his heart and punctured his abdomen. He screamed and hit me." Her veined, parchment hand slowly rose and touched her left temple. "I woke up on the bed. The coins and Norman were gone. Inside the tunnel I found some blood and went all the way back to Madison Hall, but he was nowhere to be found. The door to Madison was locked, and I had the key. I couldn't imagine where he had gone. Finally I had to give up, I couldn't stay down there any longer." She stared at me a moment. She set her empty glass beside Norman's skull and said, "What do you intend to do?"

"Why did you need money so badly?"

"You lack the astuteness to understand."

"Allow me to take a shot at it."

"Darren Cole, the college president, was holding a party for the faculty. I wanted the money for a new dress and a gift for his wife. It was her birthday. I was a young, untenured instructor, and appearances, protocol, are paramount at such times."

"You went to Edmund's room and got that four hundred, didn't you?"

She looked at me with hooded eyes. "I assumed you wouldn't understand."

"You killed for a new dress. A man died an agonizing death, alone, in a black hole, so you could have a dress. You're right, I don't understand."

I put a finger under her chin and pushed her face up.

"At ten tomorrow morning I'm meeting with Stanley Humphreys, the district attorney, and Carl Morin, the chief of police. I'll tell my tale, show them Norman's skull, take them into the tunnel and show them where Norman hid and died." I smiled. "As you undoubtedly know, the Silver Street Center still exists. In all likelihood, when you're in prison, they'll receive the money. A bit late and a bit short, but welcome nevertheless. As a historian I sense a legend here. I suspect the story of the silver dollars will become a myth. Fathers will scare their small daughters with the tale of Ellen Hughes."

"You dramatize. It has been fifty-three years. Why bother? Why do this to me? At best I have only a few years left. Let me live them here, and I will give you fifty thousand dollars. Fifty thousand dollars! You will be able to do your drinking in finer places than the downtown park."

Fifty thousand. I wouldn't have to endure another New Hampshire winter, nor would I have to cut and split sixty cords of wood. And I could purchase a car and not have to pedal my ass everywhere. A very fine offer indeed. I stood and, under the heavy gaze of Ellen Hughes, walked to the bar, poured myself an ounce or so of scotch, slowly swirled it around in the glass, then tossed it down. I damn near gagged but managed to maintain my iron composure. I walked back to the table, put the knife, the coins, and Norman Rogers back into my bookbag, gave Ellen Hughes my very best tough-guy look, and whispered, "No. You're going to prison."

At ten the next morning I walked into Gretchen's, put the bike against the back wall, and plunked my butt down on the last stool, the one with the wobble.

When Gretchen came over with a steaming mug of coffee, I asked, as I always do, "What's new in our little world?"

With two fingers Gretchen fished a long pink cigarette out of her sweatpants pocket and lit it with a four inch hissing blast from a Bic lighter. "Some retired teacher up and killed herself last night. Benny Mandell, that old cop with the limp? Said she

must have taken forty, fifty Valiums. Her daughter found her this morning 'bout seven. Lying in bed dressed in a black silk suit."

Gretchen inhaled deeply and blew a thin stream of smoke over my head.

"She was eighty," she said. "Wonder what I'll do when I get that old. I mean, that's on the edge of serious old."

"I don't want to think about it," I said.

I dithered around for two weeks. Nobody came around making indiscreet accusations or demanding explanations. So I spent three long nights cleaning the crud and tarnish off the rest of the coins and on a cool, dew-soaked morning knocked on Annie's kitchen door.

After a while the door swung open. Dressed in a frayed purple horror of a robe, her hair looking like storm-ravaged wheat, she stared at me with a gaze that would melt rock. I dipped my head, pulled on an imaginary lock of hair, and said, "Thought I'd drop in for coffee."

That earned me a grunt. She turned from the door, and I walked into a small kitchen equipped with every imaginable appliance that twisted minds can dream up. I sat at a round, laminated oak table with a small black combination TV-VCR for a

centerpiece. Annie put a mug of coffee in front of me.

Annie is a retired veterinarian, an expert horticulturist, an accomplished painter, and, I am told, a classical pianist. She is also an avid coin collector.

Trying to refrain from any dramatics, I took four 1935 silver dollars out of my pocket and gently laid them beside her black ceramic mug.

Annie dragged her glasses out of her robe pocket, gave the coins a brief onceover, and slipped them into the same pocket the glasses had come out of. Her face slack, she stared at me for a long time. Finally she said, "Ellen Hughes committed suicide a couple of weeks ago."

I nodded. "So I heard."

She inhaled deeply, coughed once, and said, "Harry, you're a rig, you know that?"

I nodded humbly, sipped her excellent coffee, said, "Well?"

"Well, hell. If you think you're now a rich man, you're not. They stopped making silver dollars in '35. Tried again in '65 with the Eisenhowers. If all three hundred are around the same dates, and in the same poor condition as the ones you just showed me, they may be worth seven, eight dollars apiece. They'll become more valuable over time, but not to me. I'll check them over, probably give you between six and ten bucks apiece for them. It may

not be a fair price, but that's all I'm willing to give."

"I'm going to keep several for their historical value."

Annie nodded slowly and said, "Me too."

I thought long and hard about Edmund, and in the end decided he would have to carry his anguish to the grave. Self-preservation is all.

One fine day some four weeks

later I opened the door to 1943, walked that dark, rancid tunnel to Norman's final bed, and gently put his skull back with the rest of him. Someday someone else will have a mystery to solve.

Then I walked up the tunnel a bit and sat against the cool, damp cement. I pulled a cold bottle of Guinness Extra Stout out of my bookbag, uncapped it, and turned off the flashlight.

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AN UNSETTLING INCIDENT



John Paxton Sheriff

Graves shuffled in, clutching his softly tinkling tray, looking as always like a bemused vicar anxious to take Holy Communion but unable to remember where he'd put the congregation. I say "looking like" because, of course, that was

precisely what he was not. And never had been. But the point I'm making is that the sight of this frail figure brought the subject of murder into the conversation, and considering Graves's background, that was uncanny.

I caught Archie Gates-Mutton

watching the whitehaired old man, and I waited until the silver tray of drinks had been deposited on the table and the door had closed, then cocked a quizzical eye in his direction.

Gates-Mutton took his first sip of port, teased the ends of his handlebar mustache left and right with a slim white forefinger, then put the glass down with a contented sigh.

"Right, Sinclair, you can drop the eyebrow," he said to me. "I'm not a quaking prosecution witness trapped by one of your devilish leading questions. It's just that, watching old Graves tottering about, I was suddenly struck by the extraordinary trust we put in our eyes."

"Ah yes," Manny Yates murmured. "Appearances, first impressions and so on . . ." His voice trailed away, fingers busy as he concentrated on refueling his pipe.

"Exactly," Gates-Mutton said. "Old Graves fits the part, known him for years, absolute model of his type. But surely that's the exception that proves, isn't it? Most of us are far from what we seem." He glanced in my direction, winked, then turned back to Yates, amusement dancing in his grey eyes. "No disrespect intended, Manny, but seeing you, one gets an uncontrollable urge to pat your bald head and toddle you off

to a home for senile octogenarians."

"Instead of which we consult him when we need an overdraft and look suitably shamefaced when tendering our overdue club subscriptions," I said thoughtfully.

"There you are, you see," Gates-Mutton said. "And you, Sinclair, are nothing like the archetypical criminal lawyer, while nobody in their right mind would take me for a retired army officer."

Which was precisely where his argument collapsed. Archie Gates-Mutton was a retired colonel and could never have been mistaken for anything else, and Yates, completely unruffled by the other man's usual lack of tact, was chuckling so explosively that he blew out the match he was using to light his ancient, blackened briar.

There was quiet for several minutes after that. We sat with our thoughts, gazing comfortably at the flickering fire and sipping our port, while behind the heavy velvet curtains the wind moaned and the rain lashed the windows.

From time to time Graves would drift past, another laden tray held aloft, his mild blue eyes eternally puzzled. I couldn't help reflecting that I'd been watching him at this same routine two or three times a week for at least fifteen years. He'd mellowed a lot

in that time. Now, like the leather armchairs, deep red carpets, and mahogany paneling, he helped make the Paragon one of the most comfortable and respected of all the London clubs.

"Fitting the part—or a part made to fit?" I mused.

"Eh? What is?" Yates said, eyebrows arched. "D'you realize that sounds vaguely obscene?"

I grinned at him. "Sorry, Manny. I was just thinking aloud."

Gates-Mutton snorted. "Nonsense. I know the signs. That was the crafty use of groundbait to lure us onto your barbed hook. My original remark about trusting our eyes set you thinking, and you just happen to have recalled a man you were briefed to defend."

"A murderer of course," Yates mumbled around his pipe stem, his head at last wreathed in blue smoke.

"Oh, absolutely," Gates-Mutton agreed, settling back in his chair and stroking his whiskers like a contented cat.

"Actually, the crime fell some way short of coldblooded murder," I said, letting my thoughts drift until the smoking room of the Paragon was crowded with memories. "But it was an intriguing case, and it does fit with your earlier remarks, Archie. The paradoxical appearance of the two people involved; the uncharacteristic act that proved to be the cat-

alyst; the locked room with the victim inside . . ."

"A locked room mystery to boot," Gates-Mutton crooned delightedly, eyes gleaming. "Go on, my dear chap. The bait has been taken, we are wriggling on the hook."

"It happened sixteen years ago," I began, "in a small Berkshire village. Picture, if you can, a dark, sinister-looking man, middle fifties, tall but stooped, with piercing black eyes and strangely mauve lips. Another man, small and wondrously stout, white of hair and cherubic of countenance, with apple-red cheeks and eyes that sparkled like the lapis lazuli in a dowager's necklace—"

"Partners in crime," Gates-Mutton cut in, nodding shrewdly. "Plotting to murder the cherubic fellow's slatternly wife and bury her in the compost heap, thereby putting her idle body to belated use nourishing exhibition-quality rhubarb."

Yates grunted his disgust. "Too straightforward. Stereotypes, and we already know the subject is appearances, so we need to look beyond the obvious—"

"Both men," I interrupted firmly, "had hobbies. Similar, but worlds apart in the way they were approached. One was a numismatist collecting ancient British coinage purely for its investment value, dumping the coins in a bank vault and keeping a con-

stant eye on market values in order to sell them at peak periods. The other was a philatelist. He kept albums of postage stamps of the old German empire and states in a large rolltop desk and spent evening after evening poring over them, rearranging, writing up. He consulted catalogues for reference only. If the value of his gallery of miniature pictures ever crossed his mind, it was merely to ascertain that he could afford a particularly coveted specimen coming up for auction.

"They were opposites in every way, so it will come as no surprise to you to learn that their homes had few similarities. One man lived in an enormous three-hundred-year-old manor where a crotchety old housekeeper was fighting a losing battle with the encroaching dust. The other man was married. He and his wife lived in a bright modern house and spent their evenings playing bridge with neighbors or pottering in the vegetable garden."

I paused to moisten my dry throat with a sip of port. Yates was leaning back in his chair, arms folded, his pipe trembling slightly between clenched teeth so that the smoke rose shimmering before his closed eyes. Gates-Mutton was stroking his mustache gently with the side of a curled forefinger, a sure sign that he was deep in thought.

"One of those men was a doc-

tor," I went on. "A GP who had been looking after the villagers to the best of his ability for many years. Sometimes, inevitably, his best was not good enough. It was then that the other man stepped in, for he was the undertaker."

"Funeral director," Archie Gates-Mutton corrected, then winked at me and silently mouthed the words "politically correct." I nodded absently, glancing from him to the apparently sleeping Manny Yates.

"But how do you see them?" I asked softly. "Which man lives where, and does what? Who kills whom, and why?"

There was a long silence. The rain had stopped, driven away by the gusting wind. Several of the older members were nodding in their chairs, evening papers drooping over bony knees. On the other side of the room there was movement and a click as an arm stretched across a checkered board and removed an opponent's queen.

"Undertaker," Yates said abruptly, opening his eyes and stabbing the air with his pipe. "I'll make him the cherubic chap in the pleasant house, messing about with stamps for the fun of it until poisoned by the Dracula-like doctor from the bat-infested manor."

"Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why did the doctor kill him?"

Yates tapped his teeth pensively with his pipestem.

"Pure accident," he said at last. "He was inwardly gloating over the value of his coin collection and upped the dosage of a medicine he'd prescribed by fifty percent, shriveling the poor undertaker's kidneys."

"Fanciful but false," I declared, chuckling. "Archie?"

"Old Yates wasn't listening," Gates-Mutton said thoughtfully. "You told us the stamp collector chap spent his evenings poring over his albums, then went on to say that the fellow in the modern house whiled away the evening hours gardening or playing cards. Ergo, the fellow in the modern house has to be the coin chap—after all, his collection's in a bank vault—and it follows that the stamp collector has to be the chap in the haunted manor. Now, we're talking about deceptive appearances, aren't we? So we'll make the cherubic character the funeral director—" here he glared at an unrepentant Manny Yates "—have him in the haunted place and, of course, the stamp collector, and we'll say he murdered the sinister-looking old doctor from the modern house because he couldn't stand his mercenary, grasping nature."

"Closer," I admitted. "But still wrong."

"Thought it might be," Gates-Mutton said ruefully. He reached

up and prodded the bell push, then settled back in his chair to await the arrival of Graves with another round of drinks.

"It was a grey November day," I said. "At eight in the evening the crotchety old housekeeper let the tall, wicked-looking funeral director in by the front door of his old manor house. He'd been to see his doctor, whose surgery was in a modern detached house about half a mile away. After asking how he was and receiving a non-committal reply, the housekeeper watched him go into his study and heard the key turn in the lock. Knowing he would be engrossed in his stamp collection for the next two or three hours, she went off to the kitchen to prepare supper. At half past eight she was shocked by a loud bang which—as she later recalled—seemed to shake the house. When she rushed to the study and hammered on the door, there was no reply. She called the police. They arrived within minutes, forced open the study door, and found the undertaker lying on the floor in the center of the room."

"A bomb!" Gates-Mutton exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "Detonated by radio from a transmitter in thick woods half a mile away—"

"Typical military overreaction," Yates cut in caustically. "A heavy man falling on loose floorboards would shake an old house. Poi-

son, mark my words. Administered in the surgery, routine throat examination, the tip of a wooden spatula coated with cure . . .

"He was dead, of course," I said, glowering at my two argumentative listeners. "A book and a cheap magnifying glass were lying beside him. There was a deep groove across the book's cover. To the astute young constable, what had happened was obvious. The bullet that killed the funeral director had hit the book he was reading with the aid of the magnifying glass, had been deflected away from his heart—the intended target—and entered his right eye. He had died instantly.

"The constable was right in just one respect as you will discover. But neither he nor his superiors could explain how it was done. There was no sign of the murder weapon, yet the door had been locked from the inside and the key was in the dead man's pocket. Both windows were the sash type, their rotted cords snapped years before and never repaired. The windows were closed, though not locked, yet entry or exit through either of them was positively ruled out. The sills were a good eight feet above the garden, the exterior walls were devoid of finger- or toeholds, and running the length of the wall below the windows there was a

wide herbaceous border, now barren, its smooth surface broken only by the shallow imprints of a blackbird's claws."

"And he had an alibi," Manny Yates said solemnly.

"They never found him. And I'm quite sure they never would have figured out the killer either but for two simple facts. It was quickly established that the murder weapon was a .38 caliber revolver of a pattern still in use by the British army. And because it was a small village, it was common knowledge that our doctor cum coin collector had spent some years as an army medical officer—and still had his service revolver."

"Was that one fact or both?" asked Gates-Mutton.

"Call that one," I said.

"And what was the other?"

"He'd already confessed."

"Just like that," Yates murmured.

"More or less. Remember—" I broke off as Graves came across the room with a tray of fresh drinks. We took the full glasses, each of us busy with his own thoughts. Yates, I knew, was the kind who believed in every man to his own trade, and as a banker he would make only perfunctory attempts at detection. Archie Gates-Mutton, on the other hand, had spent some years in military intelligence. His mind would be alive with theories, and

if I wanted to get away before midnight . . .

I glanced at the grandfather clock and drained my glass.

"Remember," I continued as Graves weaved his way towards the door, "we have two elderly men living in a small village, each respectable, each set in his ways. Throw in an unsettling incident, and you have a potentially dangerous situation. In this case the incident occurred when the two men attended the same London coin and stamp auction, where the stamp collector bought a valuable coin from under our numismatist's nose—merely because he couldn't bear to see the thing buried in a vault.

"Well, that was the spark. But still the numismatist might have done nothing had the funeral director not called on him, as a patient, complaining of breathlessness—"

"What did I tell you?" Yates interrupted, grinning in triumph at Gates-Mutton.

I shook my head. "Not his throat, Manny, his heart. There was a weakness there of which they were both well aware. But because of his anger and frustration the doctor, usually virtuous to a fault, made only a brief examination, then prescribed as much fresh air and exercise as the undertaker could get—and suggested he throw away his pills.

"However, soon after the funeral director had gone, the doctor began to regret his momentary lapse. Not because his conscience was troubling him, but because he'd realized that if the old stamp collector did take his advice and it killed him, as part of the dead man's estate the coin he coveted would be lost to him forever.

"So he decided to do something much more drastic. He dredged his revolver up from between musty uniforms at the bottom of his old army trunk and set out in darkness for the manor, determined to persuade the undertaker to sell the coin.

"Of course it didn't work out that way.

"On reaching the low wall surrounding the manor, the doctor saw the undertaker standing in his brightly lit study examining the glittering gold coin through a magnifying glass. In a sudden, blinding fit of rage, the doctor forgot all about probate, dragged the gun from his pocket, and fired wildly in the general direction of the house.

"Immediately he was horrified. The sound of the shot brought him to his senses, and, without bothering to see the result of his madness, he turned and stumbled away. Yet subconsciously he had taken in the whole dreadful scene and, under questioning by the police, he was able to recall

enough to solve the mystery of the dead man in the locked room.

"The funeral director actually had taken the doctor's advice. A simple man, he'd considered the fresh air cure to be worth a try, had raised one of the defective windows, and wedged a book under the frame to hold it open. The doctor's wild shot sent the book flying across the room, and down came the window."

"A tremendous crash," Manny Yates murmured, "that seemed to shake the house."

"It shook the doctor," I said, "when he learned his shot had ricocheted off the book and killed the old stamp collector."

"And he confessed," Archie said.

"Well, he'd already admitted he fired the shot," I pointed out. "Together, the magnifying glass and coin might have set the police thinking anyway, but the coin had rolled under the desk and wasn't found for six months."

"And that was another locked room mystery that wasn't," Gates-Mutton said glumly.

"Ah, but it only appeared locked," Manny Yates chuckled. "And we can't rely on appearances, can we?"

"Which brings us back to where we started," I said, "and leads me smoothly into the end of a tale that proves Archie's point while managing to shoot him down in flames."

"Meaning exactly what?" Gates-Mutton asked, frowning.

"Why, our good doctor survived, of course." I stood up, stretched, and reached across to press the bell. "Oh, he was forced to leave the village," I said as the door opened, letting in a hint of cooler air, "but he was fortunate enough to get an excellent job in a London club and . . . ah, thank you, Graves . . ."

I shrugged into my coat as the whitehaired old man held it for me, pressed a coin into his palm, and, after he nodded, turned, and shuffled away, I said quietly, "Absolute model of his type, eh, Archie? But—as you rightly remarked—we do put an awful lot of trust in our eyes!"

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Photo by Rolan Fajardo

Cozy within? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

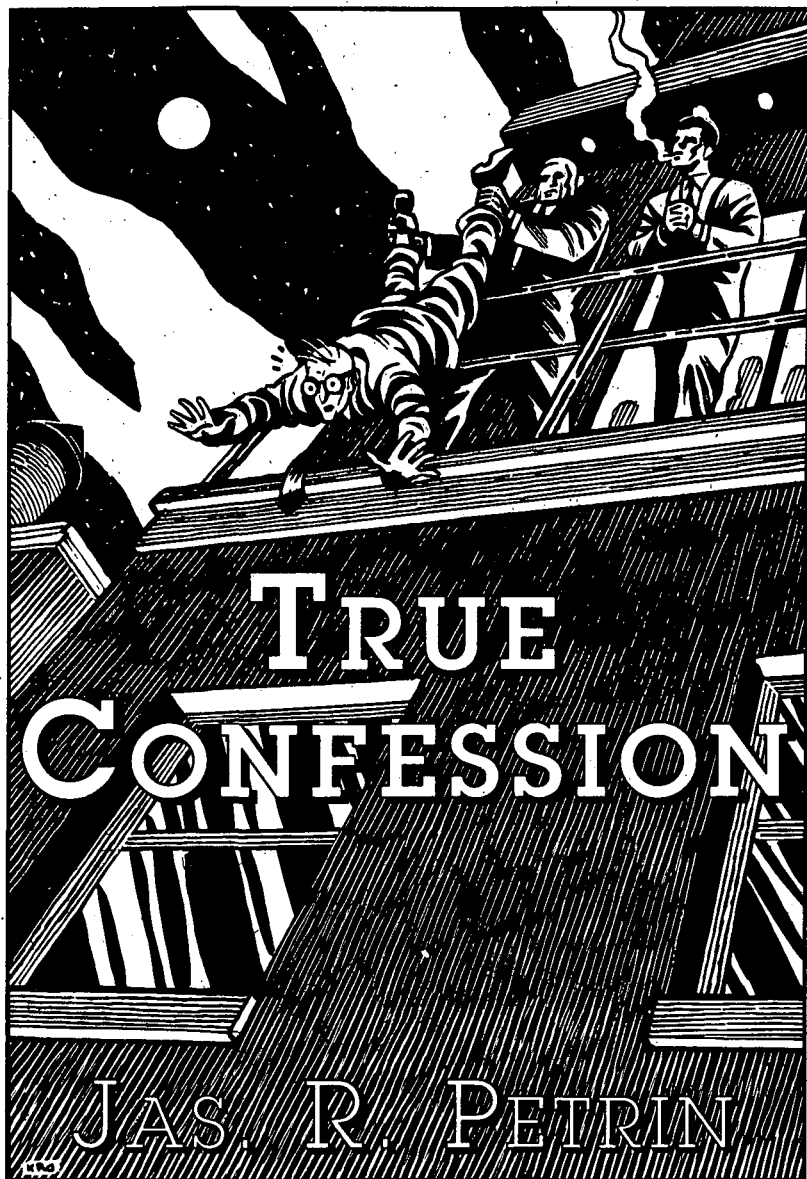


Illustration by Dan Krovatín

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/98

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You must choose: either dying or lying. Personally, I have never been able to kill myself.

— LOUIS-FERDINAND CÉLINE

It's one of those fading autumn afternoons, with shadows lengthening and people beetling home, and I'm sitting out in front of the Westbrook Hotel at Donny Rumano's latest effort, the sidewalk pub, which is a fine idea to my mind though how Donny gets a permit for it is a mystery to me. Then suddenly a darkness falls across my table. I glance up, and who is sitting himself down but Greensleeves McKeckney, a horse-crowd guy that I know.

Now, it's been many suns and moons since Greensleeves McKeckney sits down with me, whether in an outdoor pub or anywhere else, which is mostly on account of him being a houseguest the last while at Stony, which is to say Stony Mountain, a Federal bed-and-breakfast for those who have done the serious stepping-on of toes. But I don't sit with him much even before he goes to Stony because he is the kind of a guy who will get physical at times, biffing people over the head.

"Greenie," I say with a defensive tilt of the bean, "it's been a while." Discreetly I edge off to a safer proximity. "How long has it been, then?" I ask this out of politeness, since I know it must be

at least two years, that being the minimum sojourn at a Federal b&b nowadays.

"You're asking me?" he says, as if there is some other convict at the table, perhaps myself. He draws his sleeve across his beak with a damp snuffle. "If you're asking me, I can tell you exactly how long it's been. It's been two years and a day, also traveling time at both ends, and another thirty days for biffing the chaplain."

"You biffed a chaplain?" This strikes me as appalling behavior even for Greenie, who has I know for a fact been most democratic throughout his career, biffing people even-handedly so to speak without regard for rank or persuasion.

"Yes, I did," he replies, "on account of after I join his bloc choir—signing on for the brownie points, see?—he doesn't stop harping at me." And here Greenie breaks into a startling impersonation of an aggrieved choir director: "*No, no, it's got to come from down deep, Greenie! From wa-a-ay down deep! Try harder!*" So one day as I am vocalizing forth with my very best striving along these lines, he starts in with this nag, and it is just too much, and I am forced to take his six-hundred-page hymnbook away from him and biff him with it, that biff welling up *wa-a-ay* down deep, I can tell you, from

the bottom of my number one engine room."

"I understand," say I. And I do, for this is the sort of thing you expect from this guy, and it's too bad no one cautions the chaplain about it. "So, two years, thirty-one days, and traveling time, yes?"

"Yes. But it seems longer."

"When you get to be my age," I assure him, "you will find that time passes more quickly."

"Thanks for the tip," he replies with a resentful look; "it's something to think about while I am enjoying myself." Then he clears his throat. "But at the moment it don't change the particulars."

Now, about this time I notice that he's eyeballing my second glass of beer like a Saharan sand pilot ogling a mint julep, so I shove it across the table to save arguing. He corrals it with large hands. "The thing is," he goes on as if he has paid for the beer himself, "whatever age you are, young or old, slam time is slow time when it's someone else's time and not yours."

These last words are spoken with such great bitterness that I must take a closer look at him, wondering what his angle is. I perceive that he is more ragged round the edges than I remember, more truculent and peevish, and that is saying a very great deal.

"So how does it come about?" I

ask gently as if I am probing a minefield. Greenie downs the beer, wipes his jowls on his sleeve, and lets out a belch like a bloated walrus. He then heaves a sigh and gives me the essence of it. . . .

To begin with, Green-sleeves informs me, the whole situation is my fault. As I sit there blinking, wondering what he is talking about, he says, "It's your fault because it's at your suggestion I take on a small assignment two years ago from La-La Lloyd LaDuc."

This is possible, since I often refer available persons to available jobs, and La-La is a great provider of jobs in these parts, being a prominent businessman here in Weston and an amiable fellow but a guy having a short fuse with a double charge of powder at the end of it. The job is a straightforward matter, La-La tells Greenie, simply making a collection from an off-premise player who has taken a chance on a three-year-old named True Confession and who, since then, has been unaccountably absent from La-La's vicinity. This player is not only absent from La-La's vicinity but absent from everywhere else, which may be, La-La admits, because the three-year-old doesn't perform well though she seems a sure enough

thing at the time, having supporters everywhere, pretty near, until she loses this particular race and expires the following day of a heart attack.

Now, in the horse line of business there are a great many of these off-premise players, customers who phone their bets in on account and stop by when convenient to settle up. And by and large this system works well. Sometimes, however, in all the excitement of not winning, an off-prem will completely forget the follow-up paperwork, which is to say the handing over of the mazuma, and in the case of this particular off-prem, an individual named Cheeks Murphy, this paperwork amounts to some five thousand shekels or thereabouts, which is why La-La hires Green-sleeves, a guy known for his talent in encouraging off-prems to be more fastidious in their book-keeping.

La-La briefs Greenie on the particulars, setting forth the transgression and describing the recalcitrant Murphy; this Murphy, he explains, will be easy to spot, being a mortal in the double cruiser-weight division. Nevertheless, to aid in the spotting he enumerates those places Murphy is known to frequent, citing habits, comings and goings, and all like that, and La-La cautions Greenie that this Murphy is a crabbed piece of work, perverse

and cantankerous, but that whatever happens Greenie is not to take no for an answer. Well, Greenie never takes no for an answer in his life, and he is surprised at La-La's pitching it so hard, five thousand being not much more than peanuts to a guy like him, but as he tells me now, "What do I know about it? And I need the work."

Greenie inquires how firm he should be about this not-taking-no-for-an-answer idea. Very firm, La-La says. And to underscore the point he drags a paper bag out of a drawer and slides it over the desktop. Inside the bag is a heavy item bundled in cloth, clearly some sort of howitzer. Greenie just sits there. It isn't that he's squeamish. A howitzer is a common utensil to him, as familiar as a butterknife to most other people, but he takes a dim view of this particular howitzer, not knowing where it has been.

La-La says, "Try it for weight."

Not wishing to appear disagreeable, Greenie does that, slipping it deftly from its wrappings, finding it to be a revolver. Now it is well known around and about Weston that a revolver is no great favorite with Green-sleeves McKeckney, and that it is a weapon he holds in the same regard as he does flintlocks and muzzle-loaders. So after hefting the item a few times, he shoves it

back across the desk with a polite refusal.

Greenie then departs La-La's office (which is at the Lalapaloo-sa Club there on Broadway), breakfasting at the Salisbury House—La-La's treat—and reading the newspaper—also La-La's treat—which takes him about an hour and a half. Then he heads out on foot to make this collection, worth five hundred shekels to him or about ten percent.

As he strolls along, he mulls things over. The lair of Cheeks Murphy is not far off, and this puzzles Greenie somewhat. La-La could just as easily have sent a busboy or a fractious cook or one of those assistants called "hosts" whose job it is to eject the unwelcome with appropriate vigor. In fact La-La could have made the collection himself, not being above doing an honest job of work from time to time, and considering these factors and ruminating on them, Greensleeves decides to take La-La at his word and to watch out for himself with this Cheeks Murphy character.

At the prescribed address, just as La-La described it, is a hundred-year-old structure redolent of boiled vegetables and laundry. A mailbox inspection reveals that a Murphy does indeed reside here, domiciled on the top-most floor as foretold by La-La, and Greenie mounts the stairs, puffing at the effort. But upon

gaining the final landing he makes a discovery. The door to the Murphy abode stands open. In fact it has been battered open with considerable force, for the battering was no easy undertaking, the door being of oak construction some four inches thick, which is the way they build them back in the good old days before burglary becomes a popular item. Its ruination is complete, panels and frame split into kindling, the entire assemblage drooping from its hinges. Greenie can't imagine what to make of it. He puts his head through the opening to enlighten himself and in the murky gloom within detects the pallid soles of two feet tilting up in a V. These feet lead to swollen ankles, which in turn are affixed to a pair of calves like two beached seals.

Greenie breaks off at this point and jabs me.

"What would *you* have done?"

"Me?" This is something I don't have to think about much. "I'd have departed that vicinity with all possible rapidity."

"Made a run for it, eh?"

"Like a tom turkey leaving an axe-throwing contest."

"Well," he admits glumly, "that is what I should of done myself. But I have to identify this party. I have a job to do, right?"

I cluck my tongue. I suppose so. "And does this recumbent

person prove to be Cheeks Murphy?"

"Well, that's a good question. At the time I can't confirm it, but I'm reasonably sure it is because the party goes no less than three hundred pounds cleaned and dressed and has the same neck and shoulder arrangement as a hippopotamus."

"And what's the problem with this joe?"

"Oh, not much. Just a bullet hole that has done the porker no good. And by the way, it is not a joe. It is something else entirely. It is a female individual."

I am taken aback. One doesn't like to hear of females lying around on apartment floors in this fashion. "So what happens then?"

"The police arrive. They are in the door before I know what is happening, and I am dragged downstairs and hustled downtown and placed in one of those little rooms that has the furniture bolted down as if some hard-up interior designer might wish to steal it. Naturally I explain to these uniforms that I know nothing about the matter. But a howitzer is produced from somewhere and plunked down in front of me, and I'm instructed to look at it. Well, this howitzer is familiar. In fact it is *very* familiar. In fact it is the same howitzer that La-La personally offers to me not two hours previously."

I give a low whistle. "How do you explain this?"

"How do I explain it? I do not explain it. I can't begin to explain it, and I tell them so. I can only insist there is a misunderstanding."

"All things considered, Greenie," I observe, "you are fortunate not to have received fifteen to life for this misunderstanding, since, as you know, it is one of those misunderstandings that can result in the most severe consequences."

Greenie allows this is true, explaining that the prosecutor proves to be a disappointment to the police, since he can only mount a convincing argument for the breaking down of the door, Greenie having a long history in the breaking down of doors, but as to the murder, he can't prove much. "My lawyer points out that I would have to be barehanded to leave such fingerprints on the gun, but that discharging a revolver leaves powder residue on bare hands and there is no such powder residue on my dukes. So, he argues, I can't be shown to be the triggerman in any way, shape, or form."

"Do they buy this wheeze?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Then you are lucky."

"Oh, very lucky."

Well, I suppose this last sarcasm to be the end of his yarn, but it isn't. He plants his elbows

either side of his glass and leans toward me, eyes glinting with resolve under bushy brows. "I have had two years and thirty days plus traveling time to get to the bottom of things, and I have asked numerous questions of my fellow lodgers, many of whom are familiar with La-La—and do you know what I learn?"

I shake my head, waiting for it.

"I learn that the large female was not just another off-prem. I learn that she was not entirely unknown around the Lalapaloo-sa Club. In fact, I learn that she was very close to La-La at one time, about as close as any female is likely to get."

This seems doubtful, based on his description. "You mean she was his mother?"

"No, not his mother! And not his sister either, if that is your next suggestion. It turns out that this female is at one time none other than La-La Lloyd LaDuc's number one item!" And he falls back in his chair to let this momentous claim sink in.

I am skeptical. I cannot imagine this. La-La is most selective about his companions, especially those of the opposite gender, seeking only the company of those females who resemble high-gloss centerfolds—highly ornamental if somewhat two-dimensional. I put this to Greensleeves, but he isn't swayed. He maintains that Murphy, before she gets a hole in

her, is missing from La-La's life for some period of time, then suddenly rematerializes and stakes a claim on him, but since she is quite the sight and experience since last he sees her, La-La—being La-La—gives her the short shrug.

Irked, she clamps a white-knuckler on him, which is to say she attempts to extort a financial consideration based upon her knowledge of his life and times—in short, she tries to shake La-La down.

"And you know," Greenie says darkly, "what happens to individuals who try to shake La-La down."

Well, I don't know for sure what happens to them, and neither do the authorities, who have been attempting to locate several such individuals for some time with no success.

I begin to see what Greenie is driving at.

"So you think he pops this Murphy and puts the jacket on you?"

"What is your opinion? You think he doesn't?"

I shake my head. I just can't buy it. La-La isn't at all times the most congenial of characters, but I don't see him doing the kibosh on errant females. (Though if he should do this, I can believe his attempting to hang it on some other party, such as a dim galoot like Greensleeves McKeckney.)

"Surely," I suggest, "there's a more plausible answer. You know, a great man once says, 'The simplest explanation is usually the right one.'"

"He says that, does he? Well then, he doesn't know much about the putting on of jackets and the popping of females, and also probably has not done much time in the slam, because if he has, he will change his notions in this area, and in a hurry, too. Go ahead and give me a simpler explanation." And he sits there scowling like a gargoyle, waiting to be enlightened.

Well, I am forced to admit I have no simpler explanation. "But there's got to be one," I insist, "that's all I'm saying." This argument lacks strength, however, and Greensleeves remains unconvinced. So I ask him, "What will you do now?"

"What do you think?" he fires back. "It is a very smooth plan La-La has, and it rolls out nicely, but what he does not anticipate at the time is that I will reappear in his life, not in twenty-five years but in two years and thirty-one days!"

"You don't think it may be best to let it go?"

"What? And give up my true honor and high principles?"

So saying, he gives one last belch, drags his sleeve across his mug, and departs from Donny Rumano's outdoor establishment

with a grim and determined look in his bloodshot eyes.

Now, if I've learned anything in my long life, it is that it's best to stay clear of disputes between characters such as Greensleeves McKeckney and La-La Lloyd. Still, this is one time when I feel I should do something, since to begin with I refer Greensleeves to La-La in the first place, and to end with, Greenie is likely to get the worst of this, since La-La is truly a guy to be reckoned with, being a flash individual who at the present moment is mobbed up pretty good. I decide that the least I can do is put in a word on Greenie's behalf. La-La Lloyd is pretty much an inaccessible character, but I am sociable with one of his lieutenants, a joe by the name of Tommy Hightops. And when I phone up Tommy Hightops, explaining I have a serious matter to discuss that concerns La-La, he agrees to meet with me, inviting me down to the Ooh La-La, which is a sports bar that he manages and another of La-La's operations.

Hightops is at his customary spot at the bar when I enter the place, seated on a tall oak stool, dressed as usual like a guy who spends much time jumping and sweating in gymnasiums. I don't say that Hightops truly does spend time jumping and sweat-

ing in gymnasiums, only that he looks like he does. Today he is wearing a hooded sweatshirt and baggy sweatpants, and his feet, hooked around a rung of his barstool, are encased as usual in tall, bright, gym shoes—a very noticeable feature and the reason he is called Hightops by one and all.

I explain the situation.

"This," Hightops says gravely after hearing me out, "is extremely serious. What you appear to be telling me is that this Greensleeves jabonie is an irate character who is intending to try to zero the boss?"

That is definitely not why I have come.

"I'm not saying he's intending to zero him, I'm only saying he may do something, and that this something he does may not prove to be constructive."

Already I don't like the direction this conversation is taking, amazed at hearing myself defend a joe the likes of Greensleeves McKeckney. But before I can explain myself further, Tommy Hightops is dialing the phone. He speaks into it for several long minutes, then hangs up the instrument, looking as stern in the kisser as Newgate's knocker.

"La-La isn't aware that the person you mention is back in town, but he says that he has been expecting him. Furthermore, he says that he is peeved at your

pal's attitude. He says that if anybody should be irate it is him. He says that at the time he is extremely put out at the violent treatment your pal bestows upon that customer of his, and that the two year hitch Greenie gets for it is not nearly good enough."

"Greensleeves isn't my pal, he—" I give up and take another tack. "Look, it is understandable that Greenie has an attitude. After all, he spends two years in slam for a crime he does not commit."

"How do you know he does not commit it?"

"Because—" I am about to explain that the reason I believe this is because Greenie tells me it is so when I realize the frailty of this argument with a guy like Hightops. So I say, "After all, La-La does allow Greenie to handle the howitzer, which later turns up in the hands of the authorities. And it is apparently a well-known fact that Cheeks Murphy is no regular off-prem but goes back with La-La to previous innings. It is also well known that she puts a white-knuckler on him."

"As you say," Hightops replies, unruffled, "some things are well known. But things that are well known are often exaggerated. La-La is friendly with Murphy, yes—but way back when she is no more than a bantamweight. By the time La-La hires Green-

sleeves, she is only a customer. And she is not a very honest customer. When she cannot get a nickel out of La-La any other way, she runs up gambling debts and does not pay them." Hightops lets this sink in before continuing. "As for the howitzer, it is as La-La says, only meant for persuasion, since it is a matter of principle with him to make sure that all debts are paid, especially those that are owed to himself, and he takes great exception to people holding out on him, especially if they have also been attempting to put the bite on him." Here Hightops gives me a cautioning look. "La-La does not remember what happens to the howitzer. As far as he recalls, it is lying on the desk when Greenie gets up to leave the premises. He therefore supposes Greenie has a last moment change of heart and pockets the item."

"That's not what Greenie says."

"Well, you don't expect the truth from a guy like that, do you?" And Hightops sits back as if he is the most truthful individual in all of Weston.

Of course there is only one truth operating here and it is that I don't expect the truth from any of these guys, as to them truth is a commodity of uncertain value, rarely commanding much of a percentage.

"Never mind," Hightops says. "We will investigate. We will put

the arm on this party and ask questions. Then we will know how to deal with him. But however it turns out, the boss, I am sure, will be very appreciative." He glances around for some way to show how appreciative La-la might be, his hand hovering over the till a brief moment, then falling on a stack of white printed tickets next to the swizzle sticks. He peels off two of these and flips them at me. "Here is a down payment. As you can see, it's very generous. To anyone else these would cost a hundred a copy, being that they provide admission to share in a unique and most exceptional experience."

I accept the tickets hesitantly. "What sort of experience?"

"A La-La experience. A La-La social. He is getting married."

I am not sure I have heard right, and from the long splash of gloom on his face Hightops shows he can scarcely believe this fact himself and that furthermore he is not much pleased by it. "Women!" he growls. "One day they are the hired help, and the next day, by God, they are practically running things!" He adds malevolently, "The address on that card is her apartment. She is holding the social for all of La-La's acquaintances. And since I'm sure she don't want nothing—or nobody—to disrupt the festivities, this news you have brought is something she

will find very timely and useful.”

I'm bewildered by all of this.

“Hold on a second.” I know I must speak quickly to make my point while he's still listening. “I don't want it nosed around at a party of La-La's acquaintances, who are for the most part acquaintances of mine also, that I came here today to put the finger on Greensleeves. That is *not* why I came. That is not it at all.”

“Then why did you come?” Hightops asks, clearly growing impatient.

“I was hoping that if I explained things maybe he and La-La could just sit down quietly together and—”

“La-La,” Hightops replies with an acid frown, “is about to get married. La-La has no experience at getting married. Personally I think he wishes to back out of the arrangement, but he does not wish to have another Cheeks Murphy situation on his hands, with somebody threatening to bare their heart and soul to the authorities. The upshot is that La-La is too disturbed at the moment to sit down quietly.” And so saying Hightops slips off his stool and puts his face an inch away from mine to let me know that he is too disturbed to be quiet much longer himself.

Outside the Ooh La-La I can only sigh. I realize I should not have come. I have only made things worse.

Neither La-La nor Greenie is top shelf with me and I know I am not first and foremost in their estimations, and based on these facts it would seem that I can honorably walk away and forget the matter. But it isn't that simple. Not only am I the one who starts all this, as Greenie points out, but I have now set new thoughts in motion, which means, by my lights, I must go the distance.

Or make one final effort.

I track Greenie to a rented room at Donny Rumano's place. It's a room I'm familiar with—small, with a bed and bedside table and not much else. It has loose, thin floor tiles that slide underfoot like large playing cards and a long string tied to the head of the bed by which one can work the pull-chain on the overhead bulb, a modern convenience. Greenie is unpacking his few belongings: some underwear, frayed shirts and socks—all he has left, he gripes, after his girlfriend two years and twenty-nine days ago packs whatever else he owns into a U-Haul and removes it to her new boyfriend's home in the Rocky Mountains, or some such inaccessible place. “But you see,” he remarks, poking an old plastic Sears bag, “by accident she leaves behind an assortment of clothing. What, I ask you, am I

going to do with female clothing?"

I steer him back to the subject of Cheeks Murphy.

"Why should you care about that?" he asks suspiciously.

"I care," I explain with patience, "because I am afraid someone is going to get hurt. Before that happens, we must try to understand things better. Think back to the day you're in La-La's office. There were employees, which is to say witnesses, around and about the place, right?"

"It was a Sunday. The bar was closed." Then he shrugs. "But I do remember a young lovely wandering about, some sort of clerk or receptionist. . . ."

"And what was she up to?"

"Oh, not much. She is in and out of the room several times. Why do you ask?"

"I ask because we must learn the true facts. And this lovely you mention may be a witness." I sit him down on the bed. "Look. You asked questions, and you came up with answers. And from these answers you formed your conclusions. But these conclusions may be flawed if you have not gone properly into the details."

"I told you—"

"You told me mostly about your suspicions. Now tell me what you *know*. For example you tell me very little about horses, but it seems that the whole thing begins with a horse. There is a race

at the Downs, you said, and a great favorite loses. It not only loses, it does not even place, and very soon after that—the next day, in fact—the great favorite keels over, and Cheeks Murphy keels over also. Should we not be suspicious of this coincidence?"

Greenie snorts. "Suspicious? Why? Horses come and go. So do people. So what?"

"But the horse and Cheeks Murphy are apparently related. And they depart at almost the same moment."

"The horse had a heart attack, there is no doubt about it. The commission reviews these things. They have very strict rules."

"Every rule I know has got four ways around it."

"What are you driving at?"

I have no answer. I don't know what I am driving at. I am simply concerned that we are overlooking something, and if we can learn what that something is, perhaps we can smooth things over between Greenie and La-La. So I go on with this wrinkle until at last Greenie sides with me. "If it will make you happy," he says grudgingly, "I will push a little in this direction. But I'm telling you right now, it's a great waste of effort."

I press the phone on him, and he dials. He mumbles grumpily into the mouthpiece, and after a minute or so, his tone changes. He becomes quizzical, puts some

questions, then hangs up looking puzzled and grave.

He waves off my curiosity and lights a cigarette. A minute later the phone rings, and he picks it up again. There is more mumbling, some quizzical grunts, then Greenie hangs up and stubs out his cigarette.

"There is something strange going on here."

I thought that there might be.

"I ask a guy I know to talk to a guy he knows. And the guy that he knows knows this other guy who knows a guy at the Downs who mucks out stalls or something, and this guy at the Downs reports something I'm not aware of before."

Greenie lights another cigarette and takes a couple of thoughtful puffs before continuing.

"It seems that two years ago or so—shortly before my experience with Murphy—there is an argument at the Downs. The argument occurs late one night in the stables. The source of this argument is one of the pony owners and three other individuals, one of whom is—are you ready for this?"

"I'm all ears."

"Cheeks Murphy."

"Really!"

"Interesting, isn't it? And this argument entails much yelling and hollering, is a very bitter argument, and is in fact a real rhu-

barb. So bitter is this rhubarb that the stall mucker concludes that all is not well between these persons." Greenie's unfocused gaze now drifts up to lock on mine. "In fact, he hears a threat or two tossed back and forth between them."

"Cheeks Murphy threatens this owner, or . . ."

"Yes. And the owner likewise threatens Cheeks Murphy."

Greenie is right. It truly is interesting.

"And what is the subject of these threats?"

"A horse."

"Ah! And that horse is . . ."

"True Confession. The horse you are interested in."

I exhale slowly through pursed lips.

"Well now," I say, "we are beginning to get somewhere. Now for the jackpot. The horse's owner—who is it?"

Greenie shakes his head. "He doesn't tell me this."

I'm disappointed but not surprised. The guy at the Downs only wants to protect himself. It is why he doesn't go to the commission straight off. If owners are hollering, then they are hollering, and one doesn't mention such things to commissions if one is no more than a mucker-out of stalls. That is the way of the world in horseracing, and the way of the rest of the world, too, as nearly as I can tell. And so,

since no one puts the question to him directly until this moment, the guy at the Downs has not mentioned the matter.

"However," says Greenie, bringing new hope, "the other persons at the argument are greatly interesting."

"Oh?" I had forgotten about them. "And who are they?"

"Oh, nobody much. Just Banjo-Eyes Bunce and the Dinosaur." And so saying Greenie gives me a meaningful look.

Now, to appreciate the effect this pronouncement has on me, there are certain things that must be known. To begin with, the Dinosaur and Banjo-Eyes are ancient individuals, eighty, ninety, or even a hundred years of age—there are many opinions on this. They are both so old that they are practically blind, Banjo-Eyes especially, wearing eyeglasses with lenses like lead crystal that make his weepers appear as big as banjos. But it is the reputation of these two that gives me pause, for it is well known that they are business partners at one time and the business they are in is the paper-stretching business, which is to say a business that makes the most out of insurance policies. Now there is nothing wrong with making the most out of insurance policies—some very large accountants and lawyers make an art of it—but the way these two go about this gasp over

the last hundred years or so, especially Banjo-Eyes, is quite another thing, there being very little they don't resort to in obtaining results.

I almost hate to ask it—but I do:

"How large would be the insurance policy on that horse, do you think?"

"Oh, quite considerable."

I nod my head, move to the window, and look thoughtfully down at the street.

Greenie adds, "The problem is that according to La-La the horse is a favorite, and for that reason it is more profitable to keep it in good health, and so it makes no great sense that Banjo-Eyes and the Dinosaur should be involved in this thing."

"True. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

I turn and look at him. "Greenie, we need to know who owned that horse. We require a two-year-old racing form."

Greenie grunts comprehendingly and begins pawing through his meager personal effects. "Everything I own is at least two years old," he mutters. Dragging out some tattered documents, he fans them out on the bed, finally selecting a bedraggled leaflet. He runs a keen eye over it, then lowers it with unsteady hands.

"LaDuc Farms!" he breathes, looking back at me. "The damn horse was La-La's!"

By itself of course this means nothing. But it flares very brightly in Greenie's dark imaginings, and he jumps up and starts for the door. I follow but only to block his way, a thing I do at great personal risk, since Greensleeves McKeckney is not one to block when he has got a hurry on and his true honor and high principles are at stake. I reason with him. "You can't just go pounding on La-La's door. His people are watching out for you. They will not let you within a mile of him."

He knows this is true, and the wind goes out of him. He droops like an awning. "I guess you are right," he admits, slumping down on the bed again.

"Still, to learn more about this," I tell him, "we must question La-La and Banjo-Eyes. How can we do it?" I flog the head kidney until insight dawns. "If we cannot do the thing directly," I say to Greensleeves, "we are going to have to make an end run."

His face lights up, flickering like a weak bulb recovering after a blackout. "What are you plotting?"

I flash the tickets Hightops has given me.

"There is a celebration in honor of La-La and his fiancée tonight. So he will be there of course, and so will everyone else involved in this thing, and therefore we must go, too. Since La-La's associates are waiting to put the muscle on

you, you will have to wear a disguise." I dump out his Sears bag. "Pick out something. You can be my lady friend."

He stares at me, stricken.

"Are you kidding?"

"Not at all."

"Well," he says with resolution and firmness, "it doesn't matter. This is a matter of honor and high principles. You will never get me into a female's attire!"

We arrive late so the hurly-burly will prevent us from attracting unwanted attention. The plan is a good one, the place being swarmed-up with guests who are not orderly and well-behaved but guests of the most high-spirited and exuberant kind, being one and all hard-bitten individuals from the Lalapaloosa Club, the Ooh La-La, and the Westbrook Hotel, which is Donny Rumano's place.

The apartment is many times the size of Greenie's rented room and its parquet floor tiles are securely fastened down. It is practically jumping. Through the doorway we can see people laughing and carrying on and spilling out onto the balcony beyond which the hard pavements wander thirty floors below.

A sullen bruiser inspects our tickets. I am anxious lest he should pat Greenie down, but being also engaged with the carting

away of hats and coats, he does not give us much of the old palm-and-fingers.

This is best, of course, but also a shame in a way, since I am festooned in my best finery, and as for Greensleeves, well, he is a sight to behold. I never see him so attractive. The clothes from the Sears bag fit him perfectly. It turns out his ex-ladyfriend is a powerfully built female, having been in her time, Greenie claims proudly, a great noise on the women's wrestling circuit, going by the name of Minnie Mayhem or some such dub. In any event she has a pair of shoulders on her, and that is the truth; her gown slips over Greenie like a dropcloth, and he is built like a Winnipeg meat locker. We pad him out in front with crumpled sheets from the *Free Press*, borrow a wig from the palm reader across the hall, and with powder and lipstick from Elsie, who runs the Kitchen Nook in back of the beer vendor, we are able to soften some of the highlights on Greenie's face, like that glint he has of a brooding serial killer.

"Now remember," I tell him, "what we agreed. We make no disturbance, we collect information. Later we put the pieces together: who does what, and to who, why they do it, and all like that. Only then do we act on our findings, yes?"

Greensleeves shrugs.

"And don't forget," I remind him, "to use a falsetto voice."

Greensleeves grunts and rumbles.

Now, this gathering is something, and that is a fact. Truly a who's-who of notables. Floating about with tinkling glasses in their dukes are guys like Sump-Pump Driedger and Too-Kool De-Veaux. Also Mike the Musician, who is a prominent fiddler (of books, not of violins), and Yelp Lauder, who is in the removal business, though what he removes one can only guess at, since he does no removing in the presence of witnesses. And there is No Doze Coffee and many others, more arriving each moment, and all and all it is a humming event. Only the star attraction appears to be absent—La-La Lloyd is nowhere to be seen.

Filling in for him, though, is La-La's bride-to-be. She flits from guest to guest like a beautiful butterfly, though I do not attempt to compare this gathering to, say, flowers in a garden, as that would require too great a leap of imagination. But the girl is truly young and truly lovely, and her apartment is lovely, too, being filled with bric-a-brac and gewgaws of the very best kind and description, much like herself, all bright and sparkly with little practical application.

Passing near us, she suddenly pauses. She studies us quizzical-

ly for a moment, a little moue on her face, her tiny foot tap-tapping. She especially heaves the old eyeball at Greenie as though she sees in him some sort of gate-crashing salesperson bearing offers of discounted wedding accessories and time-share condos.

Greenie is studying the bric-a-brac and says in a faked female falsetto to no one in particular, "This is very valuable stuff—if only it is the genuine article."

The young lovely stiffens as if crushed ice has fallen on her neck. "What do you know about it?" she snaps.

"Oh, I know about it all right," Greenie says. And he does indeed, since before he becomes a horse crowd guy he makes portable property a specialty of his.

"Miss," I say quickly, "congratulations."

"On what?"

Her sharp reply is disconcerting.

"Why, on your upcoming marriage to La-La, of course."

"Oh, that." She gives a flick of her fingers as if to inform me she is already married except for the tedious legalities. She goes on dryly: "Congratulations accepted. Now tell me something that matters. How did you two get in here, anyway?"

She comes straight to the point, no doubt about it. And so I am right up front with her.

"Tommy Hightops," I explain, "gives us tickets."

Her lip curls as if she does not care for Tommy Hightops; as if, in fact, she would be very happy to hear that Tommy Hightops is maimed by his Nordic Track machine. "Yes, I believe he would do that," she replies. "Well, you had better be on the level, that's all I can say, or you and Tommy Hightops will be leaving by the shortcut."

"The shortcut?"

She points at the balcony. "Over that railing."

"Hum," says Greensleeves in a strained falsetto, adding as if it is only a slight tumble, "That might hurt."

"Oh, it would. You had better believe it!" And she smirks a cruel smirk as if she has struck fear into us, though it would be easier to strike a nail into a fireplug than to strike fear into Greensleeves McKeckney. I myself think it's possible she's not bluffing. After all, there is help of the most grim and determined kind bustling around and about, carting plateloads of food and drink to and fro and clearing away dishes, and they are severe-looking loogans every one of them, no doubt hand-chosen by La-La himself. "Well," she says, as if deciding that in the scheme of things we are only a minor affliction, "since you are here, you may as well enjoy yourselves."

But don't overdo it." And with a haughty glance at Greenie's wig she says, "Nice do!" and sweeps off, missing the sneer Greenie lobs after her and the dragging of his sleeve across his nose in an unbecoming gesture that makes him look no more ladylike than a Dick Tracy character.

At this moment there is sudden pain in my arm as sharp fingers dig into it, and turning, I find grinning toothlessly up at me none other than one of the very individuals we are looking for. This is Dino—"the Dinosaur"—Ackerman, and he looks to be at least a hundred years old and very wasted, resembling a shrunken head and an empty suit. As I have said, the Dinosaur is once the business partner and close intimate of old Banjo-Eyes, but that arrangement ends, the story goes, when they take a shine to the same female a couple of years ago, get into a fracas, and become bitter enemies. "Who's the doll?" the Dinosaur inquires, rolling his myopic eyes at Greensleeves. Luckily Greensleeves doesn't notice this wantonness, being occupied with the inspection of some portable property.

Unsure of how to respond to the Dinosaur, I tell him, "Oh, that is an individual who has been out of town for a while."

"She can drive up my street any time," says the Dinosaur,

dabbing his lecherous lips with a paper napkin.

And at that moment there is yet another interruption, none other than Banjo-Eyes Bunce shuffling up on us. Now, the appearance of these two should please me, but I am unnerved to find that Banjo-Eyes is also staring most salaciously at Greensleeves McKeckney, saying in his scratchy voice, "She is some dish all right."

As I've admitted, Greenie is unusually attractive tonight as ex-cons go, but attractiveness is after all a relative term, and I would not go so far as to call him a doll or a dish or even a knock-out—though maybe the last term is accurate enough. He has not yet noticed these half-blind codgers edging up on him like two coyotes nosing a pork roast, but he must soon realize he is the object of some attention, and I am bracing myself for severe unpleasantness. In the nick of time, however, there is a commotion that turns all heads: a burst of applause and catcalls circling the room. All heads turn to find La-La Lloyd striding in the door, smiling amiably and appreciatively at the tumult—and behind his smile is a mirthful twinkle which does not fit with Hightops' description of a guy reluctant to slip the fetters on. He pumps hands and slaps backs zestfully, while his associates, including

Hightops, gaze about with protective demeanors.

I know who they are on the lookout for.

But with the arrival of La-La all of the principal players in the Murphy business are assembled with the exception of Murphy, who would not be welcome in any case at this time. So it is only necessary to sit everyone down in a friendly manner and get to the bottom of things, which is easier said than done, these being individuals who do not like to be sat down in a friendly manner, who in fact take a great exception to it. Still, I am working out some way of accomplishing this when I am distracted by a muffled crash from the kitchen. A quick glance about me shows that the Dinosaur, Banjo-Eyes, and Greensleeves are no longer in sight, and so, expecting the worst, I push open the door.

Inside the kitchen are the missing parties. Greensleeves McKeckney has Banjo-Eyes gripped tightly by his scrawny throat and is holding him up against the tiled wall with his left hand while at the same time he is bending the Dinosaur over a stove with his right. He is attempting to hold the men at the scene and also keep them apart, for they are trying fitfully to smite one another with swipes of their liver-spotted dukes. A large

metal mixing bowl wobbles on the floor at their feet.

"What's the idea?" I ask.

"I'll tell you what the idea is," Banjo-Eyes hollers as if he believes I am speaking to him, which I am not. "This old Methuselah is still trying to beat my time, and as I have told him at least one million times, nobody beats my time, not ever!"

"Everybody'll beat it soon," the Dinosaur replies in a strangled voice, "since you don't have that much of it left."

"Quiet!" orders Greensleeves, giving both old fossils a shake. "You've gotten on my nerves, the pair of you, and I am so peeved I am inclined to beat the daylights out of you. But I will change my mind if I get some answers. I wish to know who attempts to incriminate me in the matter of the late Cheeks Murphy!"

Banjo-Eyes splutters over Greenie's mitt. "Cheeks Murphy? Who is that?"

"You know who it is," says the Dinosaur; "don't hold out on him."

"I am old, and my memory's not good."

"Then I will jog your memory for you," Greensleeves says, letting go long enough to give Banjo a quick biff on the dome that bounces his old round bald head off the tiles. "Two years ago you guys do a job at the Downs for a certain horse owner. Don't deny

it. You meet the owner at the stables to discuss the details. Cheeks Murphy shows up, and there is considerable hollering and arguing and threatening among you. What you are going to tell me, unless you prefer to be biffed black and blue, is what part you play after that in the matter of Cheeks Murphy."

"No part," Banjo-Eyes gasps.

"He's a liar," snarls the Dinosaur. "Biff him harder. He was in love with Cheeks Murphy."

"You old heirloom," Banjo-Eyes squawks, "I will fix you when I get out of this scrape."

"Biff him," the Dinosaur says, "and get his attention."

Greenie does as the Dinosaur directs him but soon finds that this tactic is getting him nowhere, and he is growing fed up with the situation, what with these two old articles sputtering and wheezing at him. He gives Banjo-Eyes one last biff that bounces him off the ceramics, meant to knock some sense into him but only setting him gasping even more.

"This is hopeless," Greenie complains over his shoulder, "completely hopeless. I might as well strangle them both, beat La-La to death, and burn the place down. Then maybe I'll feel better."

"Squeeze," the Dinosaur yells, "and put your wrist into it."

But Greensleeves has had

enough of squeezing old Banjo-Eyes by his chicken neck and lets go of both these men so that the two relics slip down the wall. Before they hit the floor, the Dinosaur winds up mightily and gives Banjo-Eyes such a biff on the nostrils that his thick eyeglasses go flying. Now ordinarily it is not acceptable to biff hundred-year-old individuals on the nostrils, even at La-La's, but it can be overlooked in this case since the biffer is himself at least a hundred years old and it is well known that he does his own share of biffing at every opportunity.

This particular biff is enough to make blood flow from a Shetland pony, but no blood at all flows from old Banjo-Eyes because he is not normal in any respect and has no blood apparently in his nose or anywhere else but only about a gallon of La-La's gin in him. And instead of falling down he biffs the Dinosaur right back, pegging him solidly on the schnozzle, after which both men sprawl full-length on the floor, flailing at one another with thin bony fists. At this point many guests are squeezing into the kitchen, whooping encouragement and placing side bets.

They continue to struggle, and then there is a sound like this—*pang! pang!*—caused by the Dinosaur tonking Banjo-Eyes on the dome with the mixing bowl. This is punishment indeed, even

for Banjo-Eyes, and he is hollering, "Uncle! Uncle!" at the top of his lungs. The Dinosaur straddles his opponent, wielding the bowl in a threatening manner. "Now then," he screeches, "admit that you were ga-ga for Cheeks Murphy. Answer every question this fine figure of a woman puts to you, or you will not see your next hundred years!"

The commotion in the room subsides. Levity melts away. Everybody waits to see how Banjo-Eyes will respond.

Banjo-Eyes peers cautiously about the room. He seems startled to find so many onlookers. He has been biffed by Greensleeves and tonked by the Dinosaur, and there is a bulb on his head the size of a nightlight and several more forming up behind it, but his bleary eyes finally clear and he gasps, "Okay, I will answer the question!" He struggles up on one elbow and says this to Greensleeves:

"I never meet Cheeks Murphy before, but when I see her there at the racetrack for the first time, I fall completely in love with her. She is such a fine-looking female. It is true she makes threats towards us, but these threats simply prove she has wonderful spirit. I call her up the next day to invite her to lunch, but she refuses to see me on account of she is meeting somebody else—this old diplodocus!" And hurls a poison-

ous look at the Dinosaur. "I go to call on her later in the day to explain how I feel about her, but when I arrive, I find her door broken down and her lifeless body on the floor. Naturally I am horrified. And naturally I make a run for it."

I notice that Greensleeves McKeckney is nodding, as this jibes pretty much with what he tells me he finds at the scene himself. Still, it gets us no closer to who the culprit is.

"Hold on, my friends, hold on now," says a firm, calm voice. And the lights are dipped to quell the brouhaha, and here is La-La Lloyd peering in at the door as stern and reproachful as a schoolteacher. "What is all this? What are you people speaking of?"

"We are speaking of a horse," Greensleeves growls at him, no longer caring to disguise his masculinity. "We are speaking about who owns it and who disposes of it for insurance money, but mostly we are speaking about what happens and transpires when the kibosh is put on Cheeks Murphy and there is a play to hang the jacket on other parties."

La-La studies Greensleeves carefully as if he has never seen such a sight before, and then he says to his fiancée, "What horse, dear? Does this person mean

your horse? Are we referring to True Confession here?"

"True Confession was yours, not mine!" she snarls.

"No, no," La-La says lightly, "I don't believe so. She is mine to start with, yes, and one of my favorites. But I give her to you, remember, when you tell me how much you admire her, and everything is drawn up legal and proper, which must be the case because the insurance is paid to you when she suffers that awful heart attack." He searches his young fiancée's face gravely. "At least I am told at the time it is a heart attack."

"I suppose we'll never know," returns the young lovely.

On the floor Banjo-Eyes nods agreement. Perhaps he does not want any more bulbs on his head. "It was a heart attack, all right—you can be sure of it. Brought on by two hundred and twenty volts. That will give anything a heart attack, including a rhinoceros."

"Personally I don't care about rhinoceroses," Greensleeves puts in. "In fact, I don't care about horses. I want to know what exactly happens to Murphy that day and how it is that certain other parties are blamed for it."

"Yes, what did happen to Murphy exactly?" La-La asks. He waits with raised eyebrows, but nobody is talking. Finally Hightops whispers in his ear, and La-La then explains things this way:

"We are convinced up till now that a certain individual—" his gaze lingers on Greenie "—was one hundred percent guilty of zeroing Cheeks Murphy with a howitzer that goes missing from my office the day Murphy gets a hole in her. I am convinced of this because on that day this same individual—" his eyes bore into Greenie "—is in my office handling that very gun. But now I wonder if I am mistaken. I wonder if I know the complete truth of this matter." He turns accusingly to the young lovely. "Though I believe one of us knows it . . ."

During all this rap of electrical heart attacks, missing howitzers, and the late and aerated Cheeks Murphy, La-La's fiancée has become as pale as a plate. I cannot tell if she is angry or frightened or both. She looks as if she has just emerged from a traffic accident. "What," she hollers at La-La, "are you trying to imply? That I was responsible for all these mishaps?"

"Oh no, my dear," La-La says, "I don't say that. I don't know who is responsible—yet. What I am saying is this: If somebody does not clear up this mystery for me very soon, I am likely to become most irate and aggravated about it."

So saying, La-La nods to Hightops, and Hightops snaps his fingers with a very loud and crisp

sound, and a couple of loogans leap forward and pluck Banjo-Eyes up off the floor and bear him out of the kitchen at top speed. Naturally, we all follow. The loogans transport Banjo-Eyes out onto the balcony and hold him at arm's length over the railing, upside-down by the ankles.

Banjo-Eyes is not pleased to find himself hanging upside-down by the ankles, especially thirty stories above the hard pavements, and he is making very loud braying noises about it and shouting for La-La to save him.

"Save you?" La-La says. "Save you from what?" La-La is very calm, as if thirty stories is nothing at all to him. He casually leans against the railing, his suit looking very beautiful in the light from the patio door. "Tell me exactly what happens that day. And be careful that you don't tell a lie."

Banjo-Eyes is practically weeping, he is so anxious to tell the truth on this subject, and his sobs come to us from the level of La-La's shoes, between the bars of the wrought-iron railing. Hightops is crouching down low to the floor whispering to Banjo-Eyes, and each time Hightops whispers, Banjo-Eyes gives us more of the truth. He begins by hollering, "It was her!"

We all gasp in astonishment. He is referring to none other than

our hostess, La-La's young lovely and soon bride-to-be. She is clearly rocked by this accusation but meets it with defiance.

"And just what do you mean by that?"

"You," Banjo-Eyes croaks, extending a long, wavering finger, "were the horse owner I meet at the stables that night."

"Explain," La-La orders.

Banjo-Eyes listens to a little more of the whispering of Hightops, then says, "She tells us that apparently she has got a sick animal and that this animal isn't likely to get any better. That is why she calls us." And here I am most impressed with him, for even hanging upside down thirty stories above the pavements he manages to put in a plug for himself: "She knows it is a humane job I do, superior to what happens every day in any slaughterhouse and requiring only a source of electricity and a heavy fourteen-gauge extension cord—"

"He's lying!" shrieks La-La's fiancée. And then suddenly appealing to the rest of us: "Don't you all realize that he is lying?"

"So the horse is sick, is it?" La-La says doubtfully. "How odd. It isn't sick when it runs in the race that day, is it?"

Banjo-Eyes says weakly, "All I know is what she tells me. She says that the animal is not only

sick but that it is so sick it is not likely to frolic and whinny again."

"Lies!" the young lovely cries. "All lies!" There is wildness in her. She is beginning to panic. For some reason she has brought the metal bowl from the kitchen along with her, and she now advances upon Banjo-Eyes, brandishing it threateningly. But La-La stops her with an upraised palm. "Now that the question of the horse is settled," he says to Banjo-Eyes, "you must tell us who zeroed Murphy."

Hightops whispers to Banjo-Eyes yet again, and it is a good long whisper this time, with much jabbing of the old forefinger into Banjo's breastbone, and at the end of it we are all fascinated to hear Banjo-Eyes let out a heartfelt sob as he gives us the truth of the matter.

"She was responsible for that, too!" he cries. "She is the one that zeroed Murphy!" And he is very red in the face from hanging upside-down when he says it, and his lumpy bald head is glowing like a distress signal. "I have no idea where the howitzer comes from, except she takes it from her purse at the apartment. She is very careful not to smudge it, careful not to leave any prints on it, and she dumps it there at the scene. That is all I know, I swear it!"

All this has been quite a speech from such a dried-up old stick,

more than he usually says when he is right-side up, and everyone in the place is ruminating on his words and muttering to one another about them, and the young lovely is standing there looking like a horror story. Only La-La appears unconcerned, scrutinizing his fingernails in the half-light of the balcony. He says finally:

"Is this true, my dear?"

"No!" she snaps. "It most definitely isn't!" She turns to the rest of us as if we are a jury, which perhaps we are. "This is crazy!" she hollers, "totally crazy! Horses are one thing. People are something else. And how would I get a gun? I've never owned one."

"Maybe not, but you knew where to get one," Greensleeves points out unexpectedly, causing La-La to look upon him with great appreciation. "It was there in plain view the whole time I'm with La-La. I remember you now. You were flitting in and out of the room."

"I do not flit!"

La-La dusts his fingernails against his lapel and straightens his jacket.

"Madame," he says to Greenie, "I mean 'sir'—say no more. It is all very clear to me now." Then he addresses his fiancée. "Here is the way I think it happens. I think you are fretting over the threats of Cheeks Murphy all that day. And when you see

Greensleeves handling that howitzer, and later notice it lying on my desk, you poach it while I am seeing Greensleeves to the door. You then scoot off and do the deed just as Banjo-Eyes describes, finally making a call to the authorities to make sure that Greensleeves is apprehended. That is what I think, my dear, though I can tell you I don't like to think it."

La-La is treating his bride-to-be, as he says all this, with a look that is not till-death-do-we-part in any way—or maybe it is, now I think of it—and there is a heavy silence all around and about the room, and this silence hangs in the air so thick we are all finding it difficult to breathe. Then La-La at long last makes up his mind about something and mutters a few words to Hightops, who immediately suggests that all of us guests should leave the premises. All, that is, except Greensleeves, who is instead offered a drink and asked—most cordially, in my opinion—to remain behind and kindly spare a few minutes with these characters.

Later, back at Donny Rumanos, I am going over the events of the evening and attempting to make sense out of them. I'm also feeling a little miffed that I am given the hobo's hurry while Greensleeves is being made most welcome by La-La Lloyd LaDuc,

and I'm still shaking my head over it and getting nowhere with it when Greenie shows up and sits down across from me, no longer bedizened in female attire.

I pull my beer in selfishly, but Greensleeves is not interested in it, plunking down a fat paper envelope bursting with mazuma.

Greensleeves is clearly in good humor, smiling and saying wistfully, "Well, there is a love story which, unfortunately, does not have a happy ending. In fact, it is a sad love story. There is a girl who can have anything—she only has to ask for it—but still she is not satisfied, attempting to obtain a personal fortune at the expense of a poor dumb animal and her fond, devoted fiancé, which only leads to bitterness and much worse for certain parties. Some people, I believe, are far too greedy."

"I believe that, too," I reply.

"In fact, some people are so greedy," Greensleeves continues, "that they will compromise anything, even their true honor and high principles."

"True, very true," I say, suspiciously eyeballing the envelope. "So," I say, "I take it you finally understand what happens and transpires there two years and thirty-one days ago concerning Cheeks Murphy?"

"I understand it perfectly," Greensleeves says, "now that La-

La explains it to me and sets forth all the details. Listening to him, it is clear to me that I have misjudged the man, that you are right about him in the first place. He is far too generous an individual to have put the kibosh on an errant female." Greenie's gaze follows mine to the fat envelope. "Yes," Greenie says, "it was certainly the girl that did the deed. I'm satisfied."

"But I am not satisfied," I say.

"Oh?" replies Greensleeves, his eyes narrowing cautiously.

"I am afraid," I tell him, "that some things still trouble me."

"Such as?"

"Such as how only a few hours ago you are ready to beat La-La to death and burn his apartment down—or his fiancée's apartment, which is the same thing seeing that he pays the bills for it—and you spend half an hour with him and now act as if you two are old chums who have sorted out a misunderstanding of no consequence."

"But I thought you wanted us to sort things out."

"Secondly," I continue, anxious to unburden myself, "and this is the most important thing. I cannot understand how one old man and one young lovely who go no more than a hundred pounds apiece in their winter overcoats can knock down a door such as the one you describe to me earli-

er, as easily as if it is made out of egg cartons."

"You can't?"

"No, I can't."

"Tut-tut," says Greensleeves, folding his large hands on the tabletop. "I hope you are not suggesting that I broke it down. After all, I give my sworn statement in a court of law before I am sent to prison, and I would not like to be thought of as a dishonest individual. You are welcome to read the court transcript on that point."

But I am losing my capacity to believe anything regarding this effort, and I tell him I will read the court transcript the next time I am at the courthouse having coffee with the chief magistrate, although how many true facts I am likely to discover in any such transcript is open to question. And though I don't like the thought of being biffed over the head, I speak up plainly to Greensleeves that I do not like this mystery concerning the breaking down of doors.

"The fact remains that there are only two mortals associated with this matter who are large and strong enough to break down such a door—those two being yourself and La-La. So if you do not break it down, then . . ."

Greenie jabs a big finger at me. "How about this," he says. "Maybe Banjo-Eyes and the young

lovely jointly and together break down the door."

"No," I reply, "I do not think so. But here is what I do think. I will tell you a story, a purely imaginary story but a very interesting story. A story about horses, love, and money."

"I like stories," Greenie says.

"You see, there is a certain individual who owns a horse. And this horse has won many races and is therefore of considerable value and is insured for a large sum. But the horse begins losing more and more races, and so naturally the owner is concerned. After all, if the horse keeps losing races, it will not be so valuable and will not continue to be insured for a large sum. So the owner of the horse decides it might be best if the horse were to suffer a timely heart attack. But there is a difficulty. This owner is not held in the highest regard by the authorities, and therefore it is likely that, should the horse suffer a timely heart attack, however accidental, this owner will be subjected to the most intense scrutiny. So the owner has an idea—transfer ownership of the horse to a young lovely of his acquaintance who, should any large insurance settlements be forthcoming, will be happy to hand over the money. He goes about arranging this gloss, but another problem arises. A problem by the name of Cheeks Mur-

phy. This Cheeks Murphy, who is an old and unfriendly friend of the owner, discovers the arrangement and decides to profit by it. What is the owner to do?"

"I dunno," Greenie says.

"Happily, fortune suddenly smiles on the owner. Cheeks is found mysteriously aerated. An individual is arrested for this crime and taken away."

"Does this story go on much longer?" Greensleeves asks.

"Not much longer," I reply. "We're coming to the interesting part. Listen closely. For technical reasons the arrested individual cannot be charged with the actual murder, and so the arrested individual serves only two years and thirty days—"

"Only two years and thirty days!"

"He returns home very bitter, determined to find out who has done this thing to him. Meanwhile, events have turned against the owner yet again. It happens that the young lovely who receives the large insurance settlement does not wish to hand it over after all. It seems that she has an affection for large insurance settlements. The only solution is to marry her. But as the wedding day approaches, the owner discovers a terrible thing: the young lovely has spent all of the large insurance settlement on costly bric-a-brac and gewgaws which, it

turns out, are not after all the genuine article."

"Poor guy," Greenie says, drawing his sleeve across his beak.

"Yes. So now there is no reason to go through with the wedding, but the young lovely has become firm about it. In fact she has become *very* firm about it. What can the poor owner do? The young lovely knows so much about him she is an even greater threat than Cheeks Murphy.

"But again the owner gets a lucky break. An old paper-stretcher unexpectedly remembers being an eyewitness to a terrible atrocity: he suddenly recalls being present when Cheeks Murphy is aerated two years ago, and furthermore he remembers who does the deed—none other than the owner's young lovely herself! Not only that, but the individual who is just out of prison—you remember him?"

Greenie nods, mesmerized.

"That individual, if you can believe it, is able to support the paper-stretcher's story. So now the owner is in the clear. He can safely call off his wedding to the

young lovely because of the stick he holds over her, and everyone—except the young lovely, of course—lives happily ever after. End of story." I raise my glass in the air; then I lower it, frowning. "Of course there is one lingering question that isn't answered: How is it possible that such a skinny old man and such a thin young lovely break down the sturdy oak door of Cheeks Murphy?" I shrug. "Oh well. Perhaps an earthquake is responsible."

Greensleeves sits there staring at the envelope. The envelope is difficult to ignore. It could not be more difficult to ignore if it is a steamer trunk. He sits there for several long minutes, then heaves a great sigh, picks up the envelope, and stuffs it back into his pocket.

"Nah," he says, "I think the two of them together break down that door. And furthermore, I think that La-La believes it. Therefore I think that you should believe it, too."

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

And so, of course, I do.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the June issue.*

Every exclusive organization has its detractors. Envious scoffers even suggest that the original mouse competition at Tilford was staged by vassals of the vicinity who, knowing that the duchess would attend, thought it a subtle way to protest their living conditions. Be that as it may, the Tilford Mouse Club was officially organized in 1537 and has since included many noble families. Nevertheless, there is a dark chapter in its long and illustrious history that members would like to forget. It occurred in 1624. At that time the club's membership comprised seven couples. Five were of noble birth—in descending rank, the Duke and Duchess of Jarmouth, the Marquis and Marchioness of Huntupps, the Earl and Countess of Kiltsdown, the Viscount and Viscountess of Inglearn, and the Baron and Baroness of Lamsbrook. The other two couples were of common but honorable heritage—a baronet and a knight and their ladies. The family names of the seven couples were Oferwaite, Passenbye, Quilpen, Ruddistone, Sandibank, Thigwhistle, and Unterstead. The men's first names were Algernon, Bertrand, Charles, David, Edmund, Francis, and Gerard; their wives were Hildegard, Imogene, Jennifer, Katherine, Letitia, Margery, and Natalie.

The contribution made to genetics by these pioneers of mouse breeding has sadly been overlooked. By 1624 the seven couples of the club had each developed a special breed of mouse: Grey Long-tail Smooth-coat, Gray Tailless Angora, Grey Short-tail Rough-coat, Mottled Long-tail Angora, Mottled Short-tail Smooth-coat, Mottled Tailless Rough-coat, and White Short-tail Angora. Competition at the annual fair was keen indeed.

Tragedy struck during the stormy night of June twenty-seventh. By morning the rain had subsided, and the viscountess went to her mousery to see how her pets had fared. The place was in shambles. Someone had opened every cage and then released a ferret. All her breedingstock lay dead, and the bloodthirsty ferret was curled asleep among his victims. The viscountess screamed and fainted.

Only a Mouse Club rival could be guilty, but efforts to track the

muddy bootprints that defiled the viscount's spotless mousery failed. The viscount raged, "Vile villain! Unspeakable wretch! I'll brand him! hang him! draw-and-quarter—"

"Calm thyself," said the knight. "This is the seventeenth century; we must act legally. Let's call in the Tilford constable, an intelligent and honest chap, and empower him to investigate." Others in the club agreed, and the somewhat reticent constable was summoned.

"Be ye not afraid," said the viscountess, who had regained her composure. "We members of the Tilford Mouse Club give thee fullest authority to resolve this dire situation—wherever it may lead."

"Hear, hear!" seconded others. Whereupon the club members informed the constable that—

(1) In the hierarchy of nobility Katherine's husband (whose mice do not have smooth coats) ranks immediately below the man whose family name is Unterstead and immediately above Edmund.

(2) The only other two members whose mice have the same texture of fur as those killed in the viscount's mousery are Edmund and the man of the Passenbye family, both of the nobility.

(3) The man bearing the name of Thigwhistle (whose mice have the same kind of tails as those of Gerard) is neither Charles nor Natalie's husband.

(4) The marquis, earl, and viscount, none of whom raise long-tail mice, include Bertrand (whose mice are not white), Letitia's husband, and the man with the family name of Sandibank.

(5) Francis (who is not the baronet), Hildegard's husband (who is not the duke), and the man of the Quilpen family all raise mottled-colored mice.

(6) Algernon, Bertrand, and Charles include the duke, Jennifer's husband, and the man of the Ruddistone family. Their mice include long-tail, short-tail, and tailless breeds.

(7) Neither Margery's husband nor Algernon breeds rough-coat mice. Neither Margery's husband nor the man of the Oferwaite family breeds short-tail mice. Algernon's family isn't Oferwaite.

One week later the constable spoke to the assembled members. "May it please your worships, I did investigate," he said. "The same person who so foully released the ferret to wreak his havoc also left tell-tale muddy bootprints. Therein, gentlemen, lies the solution.

(8) "With your permission, sires, I examined the boots of the gen-

tleman. Traces of mud were present on those of Imogene's husband, the baronet, the knight, and David (who is not married to Letitia). These four bear the ancient and respected family names of Oferwaite, Passenbye, Quilpen, and Ruddistone, yet one is guilty.

(9) "Now for the ferret. As ye well know, ownership of ferrets is limited to nobility. Nevertheless, I feel duty-bound to report that ferrets are owned by Gerard, the man with the family name of Unterstead, the baron, and the gentleman raising white mice. That these four own ferrets is confirmed by their wives—Hildegard, Katherine, Letitia, and Margery."

Who killed whose mice? What breed were they?

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

On Thursday, Unterburg was visited by Bart Gallago, the lookout; Frank Karbanzo, the driver; and Danny Iannello, the bank robber.

MOBSTER	SPECIALTY	S'TOWN	T'VILLE	U'BURG	V'POLIS
Alfie Jellilicki	arsonist	Tues.	Fri.	Wed.	Mon.
Bart Gallago	lookout	Wed.	Tues.	Thurs.	Sat.
Carlos Lambroso	kidnapper	Wed.	Mon.	Sat.	Fri.
Danny Iannello	bank robber	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Mon.
Emilio Houlini	hit man	Thurs.	Fri.	Tues.	Sat.
Frank Karbanzo	driver	Mon.	Tues.	Thurs.	Fri.

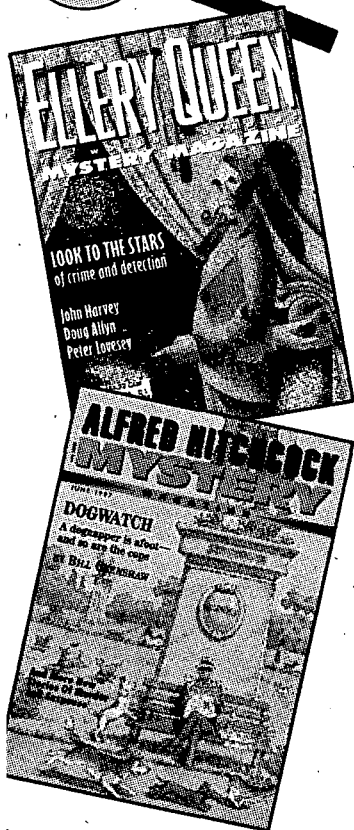
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FICTION

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

William T. Lowe

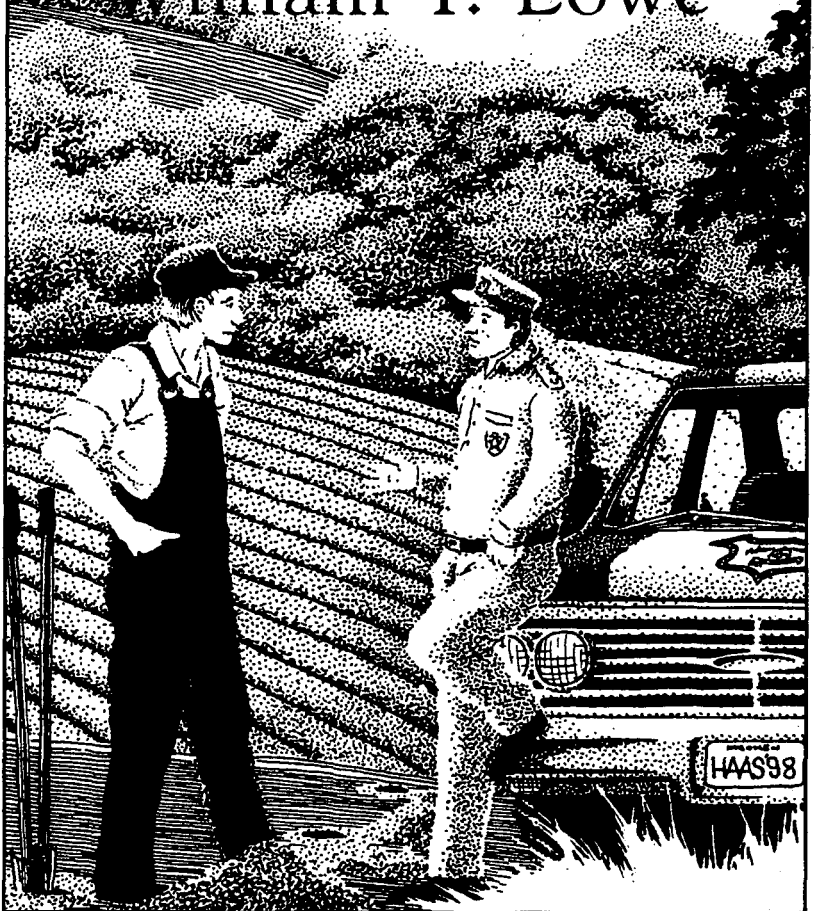


Illustration by Friedrich Haas

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/98

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“Your friend Sils is making trouble again,” Walt Havers said. He leaned against the fender of his patrol car. “I may have to arrest him.”

I had been digging holes for fenceposts all morning, and any interruption was welcome. Walt is a county deputy; I broke him in when I was the senior deputy. I’m retired now, but he still comes to me for advice and more often for help.

“What’s Sils done now?”

“He’s demonstrating again.” Walt took off his cap and swabbed his face with a handkerchief. Walt was running to fat, and he sweated a lot. “He’s got a honey wagon parked on Forge Street by the stoplight with a sign on it saying something smells in Albany. He was on the Channel 5 news the other night.”

“That sounds like Sils,” I said. I stepped down the bank and shook hands with Walt. “Is he blocking traffic?”

“No, but somebody could get hurt. That’s a right busy corner, you know,” he said virtuously. “And we done had a complaint.”

I nodded. “But if you take him in, you know what will happen.”

Walt snorted. “I know. The judge will give him a talking to and turn him loose. And I’ll have egg on my face again.” He put his cap back on and looked at me. “You remember that firetower deal last month. Sils won’t listen to me. How about you go talk to him?”

I knew what was eating Walt. Sils had embarrassed him over the firetower incident; he would like nothing better than to arrest Sils if he could make it stick, but he would have to have something better than a minor traffic infraction.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Good.” He opened the car door. “Sils is a good farmer and everybody likes him,” he said reluctantly, “but he takes this free speech thing too far.” He drove away, and I went back to my digging. It was a hot summer day, but at least the black flies were gone. All morning I’d been fighting big rocks, and there was one I couldn’t budge. I had two options. I could rent a backhoe to get it out, or I could reroute the fence. I decided to go into town to have lunch and to see what Sils Varnway was up to.

Sils is a good dairy farmer, probably one of the best in northern New York. He has an automated milking parlor, and he uses artificial insemination for his herd. He feeds his cows damaged chocolate from Pennsylvania factories when he can get it; it increases the butterfat content of the milk. He uses shredded newspapers for bedding.

But mainly Sils is a crusader, a good one. He makes people think

about the things that affect their lives. And like Will Rogers, he never met a man he didn't like. Sils is a touch naive; otherwise he would have made a good politician.

The only thing I had against Sils was the way he treated his daughter Madge. When he was on one of his campaigns, he left the running of the farm to Madge, her son Ned, and one hired hand. While Sils was off protesting against the new bovine growth hormone or something, Madge had to see to the milking, feeding, and cleaning of a hundred head of cows.

"It's rough, Uncle Hank," Madge told me one time. "With milk prices the way they are, we can't afford to put on any more help, and . . ."

We're not related, but I was pleased to have her call me that. Madge has a plump face, a stocky build, and her father's blue eyes. She has blonde hair and wore it in two thick braids that fell past her shoulders. I think the Varnways could trace themselves back to Sweden if they had a mind to.

Her son is a big strong boy who wears cowboy clothes and plays a guitar. I never knew his father; nobody ever mentioned him.

"If Dad would stay home more and just write letters or something . . ." Madge said. That was as close as she ever came to complaining.

It was after two o'clock when I drove down Main Street in Fountain to the traffic light where Sils was parked with his honey wagon. That's what dairy farmers call a manure spreader. It's a big awkward-looking machine towed behind a tractor to spread manure on fields after plowing. Even in dry weather it's haunted by a most distinctive aroma.

Propped against it were two signs printed on big sheets of plywood:

WHAT SMELLS IN ALBANY?

WHEN DO WE GET ESTATE TAX REFORM?

I know that New York has the highest estate tax in the nation and the lowest exemption allowance. It's especially hard on farmers. Sils might have been a gadfly, but we need people like him to speak for us up here. More people ride the subways in New York City in just one day than live in all of upstate New York.

Sils sat on a folding chair under a beach umbrella. As I walked up, a schoolbus passed, the children waving and cheering. Sils swept off his hat and waved back. He is a spry-looking fifty, bald as an egg, with sparkling blue eyes and a pleasant, open face. He squinted against the sun and grinned at me.

"How you been keeping, Brother Sessions?" he said. Like an old fashioned minister Sils addresses everyone as "Brother" or "Sister." He held out a clipboard. "How about signing our petition? The governor's dragging his feet on the estate tax reform bill, and we need action now. Got to let our voice be heard in Albany, you know!"

I accepted a chair and signed the petition. I made a show of looking through the pages.

"Looks like you've got everybody in town here, Sils. Isn't it about time you took this rig home?"

"I'm not blocking traffic."

"No, but you don't want to get cited as a public nuisance. You've been here a week, and I'm sure they've got the message down in Albany."

"Well, maybe I'll just stay another day or two."

I shook my head. "No need, Sils. The legislature is going on vacation again next week. The bill won't hit the governor's desk for at least a month." It was time for a little diversion. "And there's something else you need to think on . . . something important."

That got his attention. "What, Brother Sessions?"

"It's about the reintroduction of the wolf here in the Adirondacks." That was a hot-button issue; you can get a debate or an argument on it in every tavern and diner from Lake Champlain to Newton Falls. The general consensus around Fountain was to bring back the moose first, then the wolves.

"There's talk about raising the fees for hunting and fishing licenses to help pay for it," I said. "That would be a real hardship for a lot of us. We've got to let our voices be heard on that, don't we?"

"Indeed we do, Brother Sessions! I've heard the same rumor and we've got to take a stand." Sils picked up the two signs and put them in the bed of the honey wagon. "I guess I'm all done here," he said. I helped him fold up the umbrella.

"There's a meeting tomorrow night at the Chesterfield Fish and Game Club," he told me. "We'll talk about it. Be there if you can, Brother Sessions."

"I'll try to make it. Say hello to Madge for me."

The debate over the reintroduction of the wolf could go on for years. I hoped it would keep Sils out of trouble for a while.

Before I drove home, I saw Madge at the post office. I mentioned that I'd seen Sils. She gave me a tired little smile. "At least he's keeping his feet on the ground."

The firetower at Moonshine Mountain was built in 1917, one of the

first steel structures. Since it was no longer in use, the state wanted to tear it down. Various mountain climbing clubs and the Adirondack Heritage group wanted to save it as a historical landmark.

To stop the wrecking crew Sils had camped out in the top of the tower. Walt Havers was sent out to order Sils to come down. Sils refused. That generated more publicity, and a wire service picked up the story. The township passed a resolution to preserve the tower, and the state gave up and left it alone.

That was why Walt Havers had his hammer back for Sils Varnway. Pretty soon he got him in his sights.

A week later Walt came to see me again. It was after lunch; I was sitting on the porch. This time he had another man with him. "This is Agent Marvin Sellers," Walt said, "of the ATF." In case I didn't know what that was he spelled it out. "That's Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms."

Sellers was a neat, compact man in his forties. In his suit he looked out of place. He showed me his badge and I.D. card in a little case.

"Mind if we sit down a minute?" Walt asked politely. He was keyed up and trying not to show it.

They took seats. There was no small talk. "Hank, we've got a couple of warrants here, and we likely will have to arrest Sils Varnway," Walt said in a formal tone. "Just wanted you to know because he's your friend."

I could have said Sils was everybody's friend, but I let it pass. I looked at Agent Sellers. This had to be his show. "What are you going to arrest him for?"

"We think he's involved with smuggling into Canada, Mr. Sessions. In fact, we're sure of it."

That took a minute to digest. Of course I know about the smuggling into Canada from northern New York; firearms, liquor, and narcotics were the big ticket items.

"What's Sils supposed to be smuggling?"

"Not him personally, Mr. Sessions. But we know Mr. Varnway is working with some people."

"Aiding and abetting," Walt said judiciously.

"Let me guess," I said. I didn't believe it, but I wanted a minute to think. Sils has a big farm, and a lot of marijuana is grown on farms. In fact it's a big cash crop up here, right up there with corn and apples and hay. "Marijuana? I can't believe Sils is mixed up with that."

"No, he's not," Walt said smugly. He was enjoying this.

"What then?"

Walt looked at Agent Sellers. "You tell him."

"Fireworks," Sellers said.

"Fireworks? You serious?"

Sellers nodded. "Yes, sir, I am. Fireworks are a Class C explosive, and that's where the ATF comes in."

I looked at Walt and back at Sellers. "What in hell's going on?"

Sellers glanced around. There was nobody else in sight except Scout, and he had gone back to sleep under the swing. "Mr. Varnway has been renting a barn on his farm to some people who are doing the smuggling. Apparently they told him they were storing plumbing supplies in it while a new store is being built. Actually they're bringing fireworks up from South Carolina and keeping them in the barn until they can move them across the border." Sellers saw me shaking my head. "There's good money in it. A thousand dollars' worth here goes for ten thousand in Canada."

"Anyhow, we've been working with Customs and the Border Patrol and the RCMP out of Montreal, and we're ready to take down the whole operation. We've got a warrant to search the barn, and if we find what I think we'll find, we'll arrest Mr. Varnway. He may not know what's going on, but we'll have to arrest him."

"Conspiracy," Walt put in, "that's the charge." I was getting annoyed with Walt's eagerness to see Sils in jail.

Sellers leaned closer to me and lowered his voice. "I really hate to think he's mixed up in this thing," he said. "Mr. Sessions, remember back in 1986 when the Agriculture Department bought up all those cattle to cut down on the production of milk?"

I nodded. I was on duty then, working out of the Elizabethtown office.

Sellers went on in a confidential tone: "The government insisted that the cows they bought be branded, branded on the face with a hot iron. Can you believe that? Paint or a tattoo would do just as well, but no, it had to be hot iron branding."

"Well, the notion of that kind of cruelty made your Mr. Varnway hit the roof. He got a bunch of grade school students in Keeseville to mark their faces with black ink and march around City Hall carrying signs. You remember that?"

"I remember," I said. "I was on traffic duty."

"That got on the local news. People demonstrated the same way in other places. All that commotion made the bureaucrats in the USDA change the law."

He paused a long moment. "The point is, Mr. Sessions, my daughter was one of those schoolkids who painted their faces and carried signs. She learned something from that. About speaking out for what you believe in, and not mistreating animals, and how government works. Varnway taught us all something."

He sat back in his chair. "I'll tell you flat out, Mr. Sessions, if there was any way around it I wouldn't be sitting here. But we got to do it."

"I understand," I said, "I'm glad you told me."

They didn't ask me to go with them when they set out for the Varnway place. They wanted to look at the big old barn used now and then for hay storage.

Agent Sellers and Walt found a couple of toilets and a lavatory in wooden crates and several cartons of pipe fittings. That carried out the deceit of the plumbing supplies. They also found over a hundred cases of fireworks stacked against a wall and covered with plastic tarpaulins.

Sils was taken before a judge in Keeseville. He admitted that he hadn't looked in the barn or checked on the two men who'd rented it. "It was found money," Sils said, "and they seemed like decent fellers. They agreed with me about the need for better price supports for domestic cheese . . ."

It took a long time for the attorneys to decide what charges to bring against Sils. He hadn't taken an active part in the smuggling, but he had been part of a "conspiracy." He was "unlawfully dealing with fireworks" and therefore was guilty of a Class B misdemeanor.

He would have a bench trial, before a judge only, that, is, with no jury. The men who had done the actual smuggling—Agent Sellers called them the "Cherry Bomb Gang"—would be tried in federal court in Albany.

No bail had been set, but Sils was warned not to leave the county. Madge told me that he was very embarrassed, that the men had made a fool of him. He stayed out of sight for a few days, and then another cause demanded his attention.

A big swamp south of here always breeds mosquitoes when the weather is wet. It had been discovered that this year the mosquitoes were carrying an encephalitis virus that was fatal to horses. The state gave the county permission to spray the swamp with pesticide, but an environmental protection group held up the spraying, claiming that an endangered species of rattlesnake lived in the swamp.

One thing we do have up here is fine horses—quarterhorses, Thor-

oughbreds, trotters, Percherons. Lake Placid hosts one of the most prestigious horse shows in the nation.

Sils and Madge don't keep horses, but that didn't make any difference. "We won't have our livestock put in jeopardy for any damn little snake," Sils proclaimed. "No, sir!"

It took him less than a day to organize a protest. He rallied riding clubs and horse owners from all over the county. They paraded in front of the courthouses, made speeches, carried signs. And in less than a week they got the spraying program reinstated.

By the time Sils's trial came up, the leaves were turning. The courtroom is in a big complex of county buildings in Elizabethtown, which everybody calls "E'town." The room is rather small, but it was large enough for the meager crowd on hand—a reporter, the family, and a few courtroom regulars.

The day before sentencing I drove over and had a meeting with Judge Jorgenson. I thought he should know why Madge Varnway had to work so hard and looked so tired.

Everybody stood up when the judge took the bench. He acknowledged Sils's guilty plea and looked at him sternly.

"Sils Varnway, the court is not unaware of your efforts to inform and educate the community on various civic matters, efforts to which you have devoted considerable time, time away from your duties on your farm. The court feels time in jail would only result in more neglect of the operation of your farm.

"Therefore, in lieu of a fine you will forfeit to the court any rent moneys paid to you by the defendants in the associated trial for the storage of illegal material on your property, and for the next two years you will confine yourself to the limits of your farm so that you may take your place beside your daughter and grandson in that enterprise.

"On Sunday mornings you may attend the house of worship of your choice and be accompanied by your family.

"One evening a month you may attend a meeting of a business organization or a 4-H Club.

"Your daughter will attend to the household shopping, and your grandson will procure any needed farm supplies." The judge paused and ran his hand over his head. "Neither you nor I need call upon the services of a barber . . ."

A laugh ran through the crowd; the judge was as bald as Sils.

"Any violation of these terms will be dealt with severely." The judge

smiled down at Sils. "Have a nice day, Mr. Varnway." He banged his gavel. "This court is adjourned."

Outside the courthouse Sils sidestepped the reporter and hurried to his car. At the door Madge caught my arm. "I'm so glad that's over," she said. "I was afraid we'd have to pay a big fine."

She looked up at me anxiously. "But two years, Uncle Hank! What will Dad do? You know how he loves to be with people . . ."

I got away somehow and went home. It was my fault. When I told Judge Jorgenson about Sils's absences from the farm, I thought he might impose some sort of curfew or just give him a good bawling out. But a house arrest for two years! I didn't know if Sils could take that. And what would it do to Madge?

And when would I learn to mind my own business?

Two days later I had to go to a seminar in Rochester; I had agreed to be on a discussion panel on rural crime. It would be unfair to beg off at the last minute, so I went.

Then I drove down to Tennessee to visit a nephew who had been asking me to come see a new baby.

It was about three weeks before I got back to Fountain. I had resolved to see Madge and tell her what I had done. I intended to tell her that I'd pay to have a lawyer begin an appeal to get the sentence set aside.

The first person I ran into when I went to the post office to collect my mail was Madge.

She looked so different I hardly recognized her. The long braids were gone; her hair was cut short and curled. She looked much younger, and the lines were gone from her face. There was a sort of bounce in her walk. I didn't want to talk to her just yet, but before I could turn away, she grabbed my arm and laughed up at me.

"Uncle Hank! It's so good to see you! Where you been keeping yourself?"

I managed to say I had been out of town. "How are things at the farm?" I asked weakly.

"Good," she said, "real good. Pounds are up from last year."

I knew that meant their milk production was up, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear. "How's Sils?" I asked.

"Dad's fine," she said. "Working hard, staying on the place like the judge said, no problem." She grinned. "I've got some time to myself." She stopped suddenly and looked up at me. "Oh, you haven't heard about us, have you, Uncle Hank?"

I shook my head.

"Let's sit down." She led me to one of the benches around the flagpole.

"Well," Madge said, her eyes glowing with excitement, "the farm's doing fine. But the main thing is—Dad and Ned cleaned out the old barn and built a stage at one end, and strung up a bunch of lights, and guess what?"

I shook my head.

"We're having square dances every Saturday night! Dad does the calling, and Ned and four of his friends got up a band and they play country and western. Ned's getting really good on the guitar, you know.

"It's the only square dance in the county, and we get big crowds. Dad had some flyers printed up, and people come from as far away as Malone and Glens Falls. Isn't that great?"

"Great," I said. "Just great."

"You should see Dad up there calling the dances. He loves it. I've never seen him so happy."

"Great," I said again. "I'm glad to hear it," I said, and I meant it. "How about you, Madge?"

"I'm fine, Uncle Hank." She squeezed my arm. "Thanks for everything you've done for us."

I nodded. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"By the way," Madge said, "I'm having a rally this afternoon over at the fairgrounds. You ought to come. It's about the Conservation Reserve Program. We've got to protect the environment, you know. My 4-H group marched last week at the mountain, and I'm giving a speech tomorrow night.

"Come if you can, you hear? We've got to make our voices heard . . ."

THE JUST BEAST

JEFFRY SCOTT

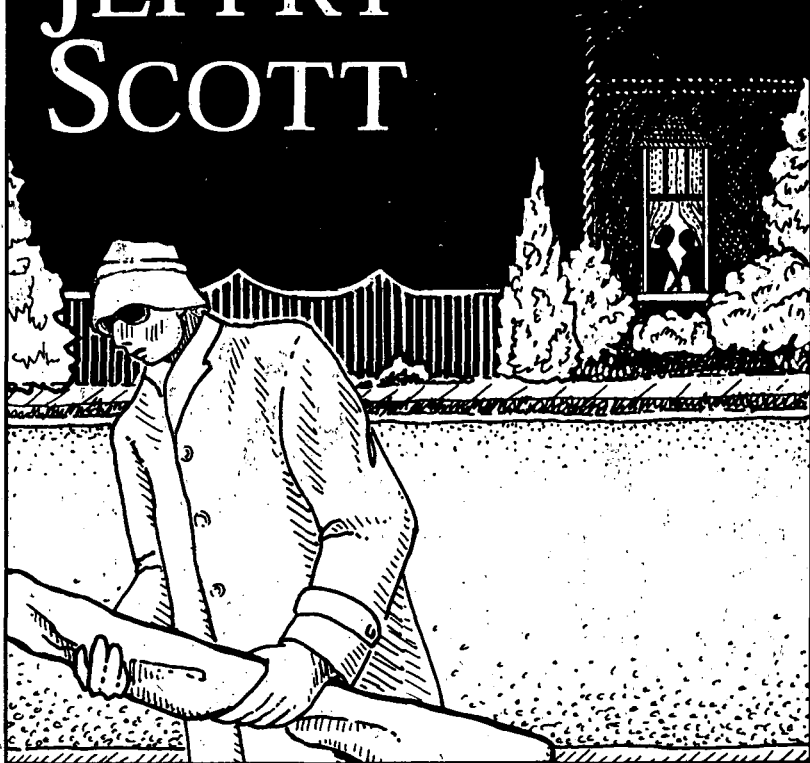


Illustration by Laurie Davis

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 5/98



Jill Tierce had long suspected that Superintendent Ruspe disliked or resented her, probably both. An impression hardening into certainty during their first extensive meeting, at which the superintendent subjected her to a verbal mugging. What made it worse was his level tone and polite smile throughout the assault, putting her in mind of the old soldiers' tall story about Gurkha troops in World War II—their notoriously sharp kukri knives struck with such dextrous speed that only when a target nodded and his head fell off did the attacker's prowess emerge. . . .

"Sorry to contradict a lady," Superintendent Ruspe claimed without a shred of regret, "but no, you *don't* review dormant cases. You have been fiddling about with them, but we can't live in the past, my dear. In practical terms, what you do is whatever I tell you to. Makes life attractively simple, eh? And what I'm telling you is to devote yourself to Operation Reassure."

No doubt he hoped she would explode, but it would be a cold day in hell before she gave him the satisfaction.

Disappointingly, the superintendent was staring over her head, unaware of his lack of success.

"Operation Reassure," he repeated fondly. "A guaranteed

bridge-builder with the community. Just read the local paper, a steady stream of good-old-days grumbles over our low profile. Whatever happened to the copper who knew his beat like the back of his hand and everybody knew him, not to mention where they stood. Never mind that old fashioned coppersing with chaps on their flat feet or maybe a pushbike was labor intensive. This force's clear-up rate is within a few percentage points of the 1976 level, despite lower manpower and tighter resources. But try telling the public that. . . .

"Hence, Operation Reassure, deploying a senior officer on incidents that may seem trivial but involve opinion-molders. They are impressed at being taken seriously, tell their friends—"

"In other words I get to stroke crackpots," Jill Tierce interposed. Self-control was all very well, but really! She had heard about Operation Reassure in four-letter detail from C.I.D. colleagues enraged at making a futile fuss over petty crimes. They interpreted "opinion-molders" as anyone lucky enough to live in affluent enclaves of the city.

"Crackpots," Superintendent Ruspe echoed meditatively. "I must remember to share your perception with the chief constable—Reassure is his baby, he's very keen on it." Still he smiled. "Try engaging brain before oper-

ating mouth, inspector. Oh, don't bother sneaking off to the deputy chief and whining about unsuitable assignments. I have carte blanche in picking personnel for Operation Reassure. My policy is to use officers who can be spared. You top the list, obviously."

"With respect, I object to 'sneaking off.'" That stung mainly because Ruspe had correctly forecast her next move. Though the hint that she was good for little else than window-dressing was the cheapest of shots.

Having been injured on duty, Jill Tierce was restricted to light duties and short hours. In time a medical board would rule on whether she had made a full recovery or was doomed to dismissal on a disability pension.

Meanwhile, work had been found for her, looking into unsolved cases, and she'd scored some remarkable victories. Now Superintendent Ruspe was pushing her even further into the background, right away from real police work.

"You can object," he conceded as though granting half his kingdom and the hand of his son, the prince. "Not relevant in my book. I'm running law enforcement, not a debating society—objections, points of order, tantrums in any shape or form, don't matter. Off you go. . . ."

"At least he didn't send you out to buy a birthday present for his

wife," Ceri Mullins consoled her over a spritzer that evening. Ms. Mullins was a good friend and the chief constable's personal assistant; pouring out troubles to her killed two birds with one stone, relieving Jill's feelings while ensuring that the boss learned her plight.

"Calling Ruspe a Neanderthal is wide of the mark 'cause he's not that modern," Ceri asserted. "He thinks any female in a job with prospects is snatching bread from the mouths of the master race—men. Naturally he lumbered you with Reassure, can't bear to see you doing well.

"Sorry, luv, but plenty of guys were delighted when you got crocked in that ram-raid last year. Crocked or no, you've still been getting results. To the likes of Rancid Ruspe, that will never do. The bad news is that the CC is obsessed with Reassure, always burbling about it, so you're stuck, he'll not intervene.

"Best I can do is give you a nudge when His Highness goes cold on making busybodies feel good about themselves. He gets these fads, they never last. It was dress code last winter, and vehicle maintenance before that. "This too shall pass."

Sergeant Creasey put his head round the door of Jill's broom-closet office the following afternoon.



"One for Operation Reassure," he announced, dropping a report sheet on her desk. "Miss Sharp and Miss Sharp, they're sisters, reckon their neighbor is a suspicious character. Sharp by name and nature, them two."

"Hang on, George, you know these women?"

Creasey turned back. "To my cost. They mean well, but our time gets wasted just the same. At least I've broken them of tying up the 999 service with emergency calls, they ring HQ direct these days. Mainly stolen cars abandoned within sight of their front windows. They can't seem to grasp the concept that parking a motor in the street for a day or so is not an indictable offense. Their finest hour was last year—they spotted Lord Lucan, not even in disguise. He was handing out religious tracts by the bandstand on the promenade."

"Great. And all of a sudden it's official policy to encourage them."

"The Sharps live on Grand Drive, and their nephew is a member of Parliament. Makes all the difference. If they were daft old dears on a council estate, they'd have had a flea in their ear long since. 'Opinion-molders,' the chief constable calls 'em. I can think of better labels, but that would be more than my job's worth, ma'am."

"I'll swap careers with you any day." Inspector Tierce paled, for

her leg had just joined the conversation, a phantom needle of pain spearing up her shinbone in silent reminder that her career might be short. She faced another medical at the end of the month; maybe all this agonizing was irrelevant.

Erasing the thought, she went in search of Miss Sharp and Miss Sharp, taking extra care to betray no hint of limp.

Only one side of Grand Drive lived up to its street sign, with solid, mid-Victorian houses built for merchants and professional people. For generations they'd looked over lime trees guarding a strip of open land too narrow to be worth developing in the spacious 1860's. Shortly after World War II, a long row of bungalows sprouted there, however. Grand Drive was not amused, all the councillors for that ward lost their seats in the next local election, and the planning department official who'd approved the project and was rumored to have come into money overnight resigned abruptly, none of which made the bungalows go away.

The Misses Sharp, Bunty and Pam, lived on the big houses side, of course.

Jill Tierce judged the sisters' combined age at around one hundred twenty. They dressed and looked alike—sad tweed suits, eyebrow-hiding fringes, and yap-

py voices suggesting the smaller, fuzzier breeds of terrier.

As with long-married partners, Bunty and Pam had a trick of finishing each other's sentences. Pam, the junior sister, not only did that but repeated her sister's closing words sotto voce, producing a disturbing echo effect.

And yet Jill warmed to the pair. Sergeant Creasey had not lied, they did mean well and were transparently pleased that a Real Detective was responding to their alert. Pam, evidently the duo's drudge, scampered away to fetch tea and homemade scones while Bunty waited impatiently, for all the world as if willing Inspector Tierce to throw a stick or proffer a chewy bone.

"Now, ladies, what is this all about?" she asked resignedly once Pam had arranged the goodies to her satisfaction.

"I'm very much afraid he is a terrorist," said Miss Bunty.

"... *errorist*," Pam affirmed, just audibly.

"But," Miss Bunty warned, as though Inspector Tierce had proposed otherwise, "we must start at the beginning."

"... *the beginning, yes.*"

"Kesteghlan he calls himself, I've no idea how to pronounce that or whether it's Irish or Scottish." Miss Bunty curled her lip. "What it strongly suggests is a made-up name if you ask me. But that's what he—"

"Calls himself." Miss Pam snatched up the relay runner's baton. "He moved in four weeks ago to the day. Our suspicion was aroused—"

"Suspicion would be pitching it too high at first," Miss Bunty amended, "though his boorishness did put us out. You see, many years ago when the bungalows were new and there was such a fuss about them—well, the people moving in could not help the wretched hutches' being built. So we started our little tradition."

"... *ittle tradition.*" Miss Pam stayed serene under Jill Tierce's keen glance. She was unaware of echoing, and Bunty no longer noticed, Jill decided.

"We watch for estate agents' signs and removal vans, the inevitable omens. When new people move in, we take them—"

"A tray of tea and a list of local tradesmen and Bunty's pamphlet on local history." Miss Pam nodded virtuously. "And we offer to babysit, although not very little children, outright babies as it were—"

"And not older ones," her sister struck in grimly, "who might be boisterous. We prefer little girls. Well-behaved, intelligent little girls."

Crumbs, Jill commented inwardly, you can't get much in the way of trade, being that picky. She felt rather sorry for any fam-



ily, already stressed by moving house, having to deal with this pair bearing refreshments, literature, and highly conditional assistance.

"The gesture is invariably appreciated. Correction: not invariably, thanks to Mr. Stephen Vincent Kesteghlan." Miss Bunty could have been sucking a lemon. "We happened to notice him arrive—"

I bet you did, thought Jill.

"By car," Miss Pam continued the joint report. "He carried two heavy suitcases in. No furniture van, so Bunty worked out that he must be renting Number 20, and everything he needed would be there already. The bungalow had been empty for several months."

"And so we continued our tradition," said Miss Bunty. "But the nasty fellow flatly refused to answer our knocking. Pretended he wasn't there."

"Mightn't he have gone out again? When I move, more time is spent fetching stuff, groceries, lightbulbs, cleaning materials, and so forth, than unpacking."

Miss Bunty was pitying. "I stayed at the window in case he left while Pam was preparing refreshments. He didn't emerge. I would have seen him, and saved us wasted effort. No, Mr. So-called-Kesteghlan was in, make no mistake." She spoke a laugh. "Embarrassing! We waited on his doorstep until the tea was tepid.

"A charitable interpretation is that he was shy. We did wonder if he was waiting to be joined by his wife before permitting social encounters; some men are old fashioned about that, thank goodness. Hah! There is no wife, or if there is, she does not live with him."

Miss Pam ventured, "He does show himself sometimes, he does go out."

"Skulks out," Miss Bunty amended. "More often than not he scuttles to the garage and drives his car out after dark. That is not normal. It's all very suggestive of having something to hide. There is more, mark you. Kesteghlan cannot be . . . it's hard to estimate his age from the little we have seen, but judging by his gait he is neither elderly nor handicapped.

"Despite being able-bodied, he has no trade and doesn't go out to work. Just sits over there refusing to answer the door." She made it sound a career or vocation of sorts; besieged by the Sharps, perhaps it was.

"Or the phone," Miss Pam put in wistfully. "He doesn't answer that, either. We have the Harrisons' number in our Big Book, they lived at Number 20 before. The phone just rings and rings. I couldn't ignore the telephone as he does."

"The Harrisons were quite civil in their way. He was an artisan,


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a motor mechanic, but always touched his cap when greeting one in the street. We sat with little Tracey every Wednesday while the Harrisons went ball-room dancing." Miss Bunty nodded several times. "Kesteghlan is not the Harrisons."

"... no, not the Harrisons," her sister lamented.

A mosquitolike hum invaded Inspector Tierce's right ear, overtune to a rare bout of migraine. Listening to them jostling to complete solos, then joining in semi-duets, was a subtle form of torture. Was she doomed to be their straight-person forever?

"I get the picture, he keeps to himself." The Misses Sharp looked so hurt that she regretted her brusqueness, though not much. "Sorry, but it's hardly the profile of, what did you say earlier? A terrorist?"

Miss Bunty looked at Miss Pam, and she regarded Miss Bunty, both women faintly smug. Jill had noted much the same mute exchange between another pair of women of a certain age. They were bridge partners at her mother's regular sessions, and the look heralded abundant trumps and gleeful expectation of trouncing the opposition.

"I think," said Miss Bunty, "we'd better tell the inspector about—"

"The rifle," Miss Pam yelled. "He has a rifle. He positively

smuggles it to his car when he goes out after dark."

Half an hour later Miss Bunty frowned. "Ought you to wait for backup, dear?"

Now how, Inspector Tierce asked herself as she escaped the sisters, can I deduce that you watch a lot of American cop shows? And aloud, "I'm only going to walk past the place. His car's not there, so presumably he is away, and even if he is at home, you say yourself that Kesteghlan stays low. I'm not taking my life in my hands."

"You know best, inspector." Manifestly the senior Miss Sharp doubted that; a phantom "... best" drifted out from the shadowy hall behind her. "You will keep us up to date on developments?"

"Definitely." Jill established eye contact with Miss Bunty. "Make no more attempts to approach the man. It might," she argued with a burst of creativity, "compromise my investigation."

Obviously the Misses Sharp had been making spirited bids to poke their noses into Mr. Kesteghlan's business, and he was having none of it. He seemed abnormally fond of privacy, and such people could be short-tempered when persecuted. Casting about for an equivalent to road rage, she settled on inquisitive spinster rage—she did not want



Bunty and Pam falling victim to that.

Crossing Grand Drive at an angle in order to reach the far side upstream of Number 20, she was able to pass it on the way back to her car. The minuscule front garden grew flagstones rather than flowers, the paintwork was a little dingy. It was easy to believe that the dwelling sheltered an uncaring tenant, not a proud owner. Visible windows were curtained, mildly odd when an hour of daylight remained but less than sinister. The up-and-over door of the garage was shut and, she would bet, locked.

Shy or secretive, Kesteghlan kept his house uninformative. Shrugging mentally, Inspector Tierce went straight home from the Sharps. She was supposed to work for a limited number of hours per day and experienced no urge to log overtime on Operation Reassure. Yet as microwaved supper-for-one was succeeded by a TV panel game—you really know how to live it up, Jill taunted herself—she could not stop worrying over Bunty and Pam's overtly ridiculous concern.

The trouble was, they made dramatic claims that wilted under examination. Take the famous rifle . . . That came down to Miss Bunty's "happening" to be at her bedroom window towards midnight, light out, when Kesteghlan had emerged from the

bungalow opposite, carrying an object wrapped in a blanket, a muffled shape indicating a slender tube with a wider part at one end. From the way he handled the package, it was reasonably heavy.

"He started to lay it on the back seat, then changed his mind, unlocked the boot, and stowed it there. He needed both hands for unlocking, so he propped the bundle against the side of the car, and it clinked. The barrel of the rifle must have poked out of the blanket as he put the thing down because the noise was metal against metal."

Sensing skepticism, Miss Bunty said, "My window was open, and sound does carry on a still night. A moonlit night, too, I could see perfectly." Sure you did, Jill heckled silently, at least twenty yards across the avenue, and you wear glasses. "I could tell it was a rifle," Miss Bunty insisted, "even though he'd wrapped it up. The outline is unmistakable. We lived in Africa, you know. I have been on safari a number of times."

"And so have I," Miss Pam asserted, as if that counted. "Bunty never makes mistakes. She is highly observant. She won badges for it in the Girl Guides."

"There is an accumulation of evidence," Miss Bunty continued, frowning her to silence. "I wish you could have seen him han-



dling that shrouded rifle, inspector: rapid, furtive movements, looking this way and that.

"Item, Kesteghlan's name, patently invented. There is not one Kesteghlan in the Mid-Wessex phone book, for instance, let alone a Stephen Vincent of that ilk. Item, the secrecy of his life-style—"

"Excuse my butting in, but how do you know his full name?"

"One of his letters was included with our delivery," Miss Pam explained. "The postman, only it's a young woman, postgirl I suppose, zigzags from side to side of the road—"

"Stupid method, puts miles on her route," Miss Bunty grunted. "Postperson, Pammy, get it right."

"I expect it stops her getting bored, the zigzagging," Miss Pam suggested vaguely. "In all events, that is how she does it, so Number 20 comes directly before Number 69, our number, the way she arranges the letters. The numbering is confusing because our side starts at 30, don't ask me why, and the new bungalows took the lower numbers."

Told more than she needed to know, Inspector Tierce yearned for the chatter to become relevant. From short yet bitter experience she knew one couldn't push the pair, it was no more use than pushing treacle.

"And somehow she put his let-

ter in with ours: 'Stephen Vincent Kesteghlan.' We wrote it down at the time, er, in case the mistake occurred again." Miss Pam produced this transparent falsehood unblushingly.

"An oblong white envelope," Miss Bunty recalled. "Documents of some sort, it was plumper than a single letter. The envelope bore the symbol of the Seamens' & Graziers' Bank, and the return address on the back was for the main office in Hull. I believe the nearest local branch is at Bristol. I took the letter straight over the road and tried to make contact with him in case he assumed we had intercepted his post. As usual, he skulked in-doors."

Miss Bunty's eyes glittered. "I put the envelope a little way into the slot in the front door. Pam saw it vanish the instant I turned my back and walked towards the gate."

"Like a tongue being put back in," her sister giggled. "With the letterbox for the mouth, you know."

"Item," Miss Bunty continued, "Kesteghlan, as we must refer to him, seldom shows his face in daytime and—"

"There's the waste bin," said Miss Pam. "We have wheely-bins, they must be put out on the footpath by seven on Wednesday mornings. Progress! Daddy would have died if he'd foreseen



his daughters' doing half the dustmen's work for them one day."

"He did die, you muttonhead," Miss Bunty commented dryly. "She's right, though, inspector. Bins out by seven, else one's stuck with the garbage for another seven days, and nowhere to put subsequent rubbish meanwhile. Everybody wheels their bin out the night before. Kesteghlan does it last of all. I listen to the radio after going to bed, never drop off before one in the morning, and that's about the time I hear the rattle of his bin being put out. What's more, his is the last bin to be taken back in. Most of us retrieve them as soon as they're emptied, they do not improve the view. His bin stays out on the footpath until long after dark. More skulking, he does his damndest—"

"Ooh, Bunts, swear-box for you!"

"Does his level best then to avoid being seen."

"But you can describe him," Jill prompted.

Here the observant Misses Sharp came up short. Kesteghlan, Miss Bunty admitted fairly-mindedly, did not wear a disguise but "might just as well do for all one can see of him." The shy neighbor was male and neither young nor ancient, that was as far as the watchers would go. Kesteghlan always wore a long

raincoat and a floppy tweed hat. His head stayed down, chin tucked into chest, his foreshortened face further masked by what Miss Bunty described as sunglasses and Miss Pam believed to be prescription lenses, "Tinted, but clear enough to see through. They're yellow, like the glasses I have for driving at night."

Home again, unable to concentrate on TV, Jill listened to an Elgar cello piece on her music center and sipped hot chocolate. The only factor saving the sisters' allegation from being an old wives' tale was that they were unmarried, she brooded. Frustrated snoopers, they had erected a mountain from a pimple, not even a molehill.

And yet and yet, as the cliché went. They were not fools although their dark theories seemed foolish. Miss Bunty was convinced that she had seen Kesteghlan—and it *was* an odd surname, for whatever that was worth—handling a rifle. Jill was inclined to trust her on that point. Mainly for the illogical reason that Bunty's sureness had a laughably shaky foundation, that glimpse of what most people would dismiss as an anonymous bundle. Realm of instinct: growing up in Africa. Miss Sharp had seen rifles wrapped against torrential rain or soaking dew, and recently she had seen more of the

same. "So *she* says," Inspector Tierce muttered, remembering that Bunty and Pam were compulsive criers of wolf, and took herself off to bed. She'd been presented with a mare's nest—and what a ridiculous phrase that was, horses do not roost in trees. Why mare and not stallion, come to that?

Drowsily she pondered on archetypal sexism in proverbs and folk tales. Her final pre-sleep notion was discomfiting. Had she dismissed the Sharps' theory not on its merits but because it was fruit of the poison tree called Operation Reassure and its obnoxious gardener, Superintendent Ruspe?

**D**etective-sergeant Salmon asserted, "You're trying to palm this off on me. That's how I see it."

Salmon was the Special Branch officer attached to the Wessex-Coastal police, so terrorism was squarely within his remit. Having slept on it, Jill had gone to him the next morning and relayed her scrap of speculation. She knew Sergeant Salmon by sight and was unimpressed by what she'd seen. He held a double-first from Cambridge and thus a reputation for steely intelligence. Speak as you find: Inspector Tierce couldn't help pegging him as vain and dense.

"I mean," he grinned, "you've been demote—uh, transferred to Operation Reassure, and that isn't a prime source of intelligence on the IRA. How reliable is your informant?"

"Informants, plural. Reliable enough, in the sense of being respectable. They do make rather a habit of getting het up over smoke without fire."

Sergeant Salmon lost his smirk. "Look, I've got the royal visit to Mid-Wessex University on Friday, so there is rather a lot on my plate at present. Kesteven goes on the back burner, you'd be well advised to check him out for yourself. I can't be expected to drop everything whenever some citizen loads a bundle of golf clubs or a bit of central heating pipe into his car."

Jill smiled sweetly. "Understood. The name is Kesteghlan, by the way. I've written it out for you, block capitals. I don't expect you to do anything, sergeant; passing this on comes under the heading of insurance."

Salmon goggled at her, and she translated. "When Kesteghlan turns out to be point man for the IRA, I want it on record that I followed procedure by reporting his presence to Special Branch."

She left Sergeant Salmon thoughtful, unless, as she hoped, it was helpless fuming. Petty retaliation, but nowhere in her job



description was nobility laid down.

"References, yes, there must have been some, it's company policy." Angela Folland, an amiable though overworked woman whose office reeked of stale cigarette smoke and fresher perfume, liberally applied, scratched her head with the eraser end of a pencil. She was Apex Property Management Services, and it had taken Inspector Tierce all morning to locate her by working through estate agencies and landlords' middlemen in the yellow pages.

Mrs. Folland reached for a box file, then stilled the movement.

"Now I remember! She came back later and asked for the references back, she'd run out of photocopies, and they can be expensive if you don't have your own machine . . ."

"Number 20 is leased by a woman? I understand a man lives there currently."

"Yep, but Mrs. Kesteghlan did the paperwork. They live up north, near Leeds I think it is, but her husband's working as a relief manager somewhere near here. If I had the references, I could tell you which company . . . engineering, I think. Unless I'm mixing her up with the Japanese lady and he's in greeting cards, now I come to think of it."

Mrs. Folland lit another cigarette. "It must seem slipshod, not

following up on the references. To be honest, this isn't my thing. My unloving husband waltzed off with a totty half his age and left his business twisting in the wind, so Muggins had to step in. This woman paid a security deposit of three months' rent and three more in advance, so I wasn't too het up about references. They were good, though, one from his boss and another from a vicar."

"The woman paid by check, I suppose?"

"Yes. She didn't look the sort to have a lot of cash on her, and anyway, I'd rather not have fortunes to take to the bank, the way the streets are these days." Mrs. Folland pulled a face. "Nothing personal, I'm sure you are doing your best."

"We try. Was it a Seamens' & Graziers' Bank check?"

"I've no idea, this was ages ago."

"Maybe there's a note in your file."

Mrs. Folland slapped her forehead, the sweep of arm setting ash whirling across her cluttered desk. "Idiot! Let's have a look . . . No, she paid the deposit with a Barseshire Building Society check and the rent on one from the Anglo-Scottish Bank. I wrote it all down at the time because both checks had to clear before he moved in."

"Two checks, different banks, is that unusual?"

“I don’t think so, but what do I know? I assumed they were using some money from a savings account and the rest from the current one.”

“As letting agent, do you inspect properties during tenancy?”

“I check the inventory the day they move out if that’s what you mean. Mr. Kesteghlan has only been there a few weeks, and there’s an option to renew the lease. The owner doesn’t want to sell the bungalow while prices are low, so no problem. I’ll look the place over after, say, the first year, if one tenant stays that long, but it hasn’t arisen so far.” She fiddled with the pencil. “Is there some sort of trouble? If he has set up a brothel or sold the bungalow to a string of different people, that would put the icing on my cake. I really need aggravation—not.”

“Just a routine inquiry,” Jill soothed. “One last thing, was there anything unusual about this woman who rented the bungalow for him, or the transaction in general?”

Angela Folland took time to surface from an uneasy reverie. “Now you’ve got me worried. Oh, I take your word for it, routine, but having the police round, it’s a slap in the face. Come in, Planet Angela, reality calling . . . I’m a hairdresser, out of my depth here. Take it from one who knows, never get married. Un-

usual? I’m no snob, but she was scruffy, bit of a tart. Didn’t seem at home with writing checks, they took her a long time to puzzle out. . . . Come to think of it, I did make very sure the checks were all right before letting her have the keys. It’s coming back now. After that performance it crossed my mind she might’ve stolen the checks. But they both cleared, so that was all right.”

“And you dealt only with her, both times—paying the rent and collecting the keys?”

“That’s right. Her husband was still working up north, he’d be joining her at the bungalow later. I’ve never set eyes on him.” Mrs. Folland rummaged in the file. “Here’s the agreement she signed. See what I mean about not being a banks person? That’s what I call a both-hands-on-the-pen signature.”

Fair comment, Jill agreed, for the autograph was a painful scrawl that might stand for any name. Memory improving as the interview wore on, Angela Folland said, “Now I remember, Mr. Kesteghlan had already signed both checks, they were on his accounts, not a joint one, all the wife had to do was fill in the amount, in words and figures. That’s why I thought she *must* be his wife—plenty of women just use the fella’s name—if he trusted her with blank checks.”

Unless, Inspector Tierce ar-



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 gued, though not aloud, Kesteghlan had been waiting outside for his errand-woman . . .

Driving back to headquarters, Jill reflected that Miss Buntly would see the renting of the bungalow as another "item" in her supposed accumulation of evidence. There might be nothing in it, but Kesteghlan did seem determined to stay in the background; somebody disposed to think the worst might conclude that he'd hired a front-woman to set up his base. And regaining possession of possibly faked references was another indicator.

Then there was the matter of the number of banks he was using. A familiar pattern: multiple accounts allowed professional criminals to split large amounts of money into smaller, less noticeable deposits.

"Yeah, maybe," she muttered, waiting patiently for the driver of a massive truck to finish his spell of transcendental meditation and let the rest of the world proceed. There could be perfectly innocent explanations for the circumstances. Mrs. Kesteghlan was dyslexic or near-illiterate, avoiding as much writing as possible. She needed genuine references for another purpose, and had every right to recover them. Mr. Kesteghlan put savings in a building society and used a bank for day-to-day business, nothing sinister there.

Thrifty and prudent, he was considering a rival bank with lower charges; hence the letter seen by the Sharp sisters. Yes, answers for everything.

Inspector Tierce's specified daily hours of work had run out, but she rang Sergeant Salmon from home. "Any luck with Kesteghlan?"

"Look, I'll get to it! Hang on—" A rattle hinted that the phone had been rested on his desk. Faint but distinct, he snarled, "If that woman calls again, I'm in a meeting, understood?"

She was meant to hear it. "Sorry about that," he resumed insincerely, "things are hectic. I'll be in touch if and when there's a reason. 'Bye now.'"

A believer in the superiority of getting even over getting mad, she decided it would be satisfying to make Salmon look bad by doing his job for him. Easier said than done, however. As a Special Branch man with the further resources of MI5 on call, he could have established Kesteghlan's background in fifteen minutes. "And I'm just a poor old provincial copper with a bad leg," she chanted. Inspector Tierce did a lot of talking to herself when home alone.

Before seeking a solution, define the problem.

Simple enough: who was Stephen Vincent Kesteghlan?

She could go and ask him, but

his front door was no likelier to open for her than for the egregious Bunty and Pam, and she had no pretext to play the police card and demand answers to questions. Humiliating if he turned out to be an amateur lawyer and urged her to go bowl her hoop . . .

Jill Tierce was doing her ironing and replaying the Sharp sisters' observations in her head when she exclaimed, "Gotcha!" and suspended the chore to pour herself a celebratory dram of single-malt. Today was Tuesday, although only for another fifty minutes. Sometime during the night mysterious Mr. Kesteghlan's wheely-bin would be trundled out to the footpath and—

"Well yes, I *could* do it." Peter Miles was a Scene of Crime officer, Socko for short, and he had a bit of a thing about Jill Tierce; a circumstance irksome yet useful on occasion. "I doubt if it'd play well in court; the defendant's brief would tear into us for sneaking about and—"

"Don't worry your pretty little head, Pete. I'm after information, not evidence. You sound out of it, are you drunk?"

"I wish. I'm not at my best the first moment of getting wakened from a sound sleep. First early night in weeks, off the minute my head touched the pillow, then you spoil it."

"Sorry, I'll make it up to you."

In your dreams, sonny, she modified the promise. "Are you awake now? Ready for briefing, tracking at last, are we?"

His martyred sigh rattled in her ear. "All right, tell me the worst."

Jill spoke slowly and lucidly for some ninety seconds, finishing with, "For goodness sake get the right wheely-bin. It'll be outside the bungalow, and the number 20 is on the front door and the gatepost, so it should be a doddle. I'd come with you, but one person will stick out like a sore thumb at six in the morning, let alone two. No later than six, Pete, soon as it's light enough to work. The punter keeps his curtains drawn and should still be sound asleep. Make it much later and you could run into the garbage men."

She arrived at headquarters at her usual nine o'clock, the next morning. Peter Miles, gummy-eyed, awaited her at the broom-closet's door. "Mission accomplished. Those bins are heavy duty plastic and slightly greasy, good surfaces. I got both thumbs off the main handle, that push-bar at the back, and a complete hand where he pressed the lid down.

"Here's the set, and I've sent a duplicate to London in your name, asking for them to put a rush on it."

"What a star!"



Peter Miles tried to be assertive, but his pleasant face wasn't made for it. "I seem to recall the words 'make,' 'it,' and 'up to you.' Dinner tonight?"

"Ask next week, we'll see." She jinked past him into her cell, closing the door firmly.

At eleven Inspector Tierce received a fairly lengthy fax message from the Metropolitan Police. She studied it twice, and once more for luck, during which reading she smiled with malicious satisfaction. She was not surprised to get a follow-up call from London before the morning was out. "It's sort of hypothetical at the moment," she lied.

"I wish Ron Gummer was hypothetical," her caller said feelingly. "It isn't just the tickles, though he makes our crime figures look sick. The tabloids have hyped him into a hero since his last jailbreak. The Great Escaper! Makes me sick, some daft prison governor, hello-flowers-hello-trees type, lets Gummer out on compassionate release, my-laddo gives the dim escort a cup of tea with enough dope in it to stun an elephant, and exits laughing. We're not talking escape from Colditz Castle, it wasn't even clever, a child of three could have bet on the outcome of sending Gummer off to his dear old aunty's funeral."

"'Twas ever thus. You sent his description and track record, but

that's bare bones. Does Gummer use firearms?"

"Can't you read, gel? He's a safes and vaults man, not an armed robber. Uses good gear, all the latest, thermic lances and that, but Ronnie G would no more carry a shooter than he would go straight. Only point in his favor, he's never violent."

The speaker's tone hardened. "Stop changing the subject. You get a line on him, we want to know. Me and my guv'nor will be down that motorway like a dose of salts. Might even splash out on a chopper. Gummer's our villain, pulls his strokes on our patch, and he has been making us look bad for too long to let—um, anyone else nick him."

"For anyone else, read local yokels," she accused. "You picture us chewing straws and going 'ooh ur, dang moi buttons' while the cows amble past."

An embarrassed chuckle. "I never said that, gel."

"Didn't have to, all you Met' boys are the same. There's a small protocol problem here, Syd. Ronald Gummer is a target criminal for Wessex Regional Crime Squad—he does his blagging up your way, but that prison he waltzed away from is on *our* patch. Force Instructions, rules from on high handed down by our revered chief constable, decree that the RCS gets first crack at him."



"Oh Gawd, you *have* got a line on that toerag. Jill . . . Jilly . . . darlin' . . . we're mates, right? Forget your crime squad, whisper in my ear, no one will know. We'll make it worth your while—"

Relentless, she purred, "Nice talking to you, Syd," and hung up. The phone was ringing again as she went downstairs to the main C.I.D. office to refresh her memory on thermic lances.

Sergeant Salmon of Special Branch, in the Wessex-Coastal police but not of it—SB being part of the Metropolitan Police—had a better office than locals of his rank. Its door was steel-lined, with a coded touch-pad lock. After an hour of failing to reach him on the internal phone, Jill Tierce went up there and using her unhurt leg, kicked the door strongly, steadily, rhythmically. It might be secure, but it wasn't soundproof.

Salmon yanked the door open before her toes ached very much. "Oh, you. I'm under pressure here, whatever it is must wait." Indeed he was excited, at once full of himself and nervous.

"Is it something to do with Kesteghlan?"

"Keep your voice down!" He stood aside, jerking his head in graceless command to enter. "Forget Kesteghlan, okay? Stay right away from Grand Avenue.

Never mind why, that's need-to-know and you don't need."

"A dangerous man?" she queried innocently.

Salmon fell for it. He nodded loftily. "Between ourselves, when I looked into it, the only Stephen Vincent Kesteghlan on record died of whooping cough in 1957, aged nineteen months.

"Now he's alive again, with bank accounts, passport, and driving license. Carrying a rifle. Holed up five minutes' drive from the university campus, where a VIP is about to appear. And the I.D.-off-gravestones dodge is classic terrorist technique." He was edging her back to the corridor while speaking.

What a plonker he is, thought Jill. Borrowing a dead child's name was a secret ploy known only to countless thriller readers; every variety of wrongdoer was likely to try the dodge. Slapping his helping hand aside she snapped, "You'd better listen hard, my friend, or make yourself a laughing-stock."

"Kesteghlan isn't a terrorist. He's a convicted burglar on the run, his name is Ronald Gummer, and Regional Crime Squad will be arresting him . . ." She looked at her watch. "Around now, give or take five minutes."

Sergeant Salmon, blood draining from his face, swallowed with an audible click of the throat. "There's no doubt about it," Jill



assured him. "Fingerprint evidence. I tried to tell you, but you're such a hotshot, not taking calls. All you had to do was touch base with me once you'd blown Kesteghlan's cover. Professional courtesy? Not even that, just professional."

"You misled me," he stammered, scrabbling for an escape route or, at worst, a joint scapegoat. "You said the man was armed."

Inspector Tierce was ready for that. "Think again. A witness believed Gummer had a rifle is what I told you. Don't lie about it when the brown stuff hits the fan—I sent you a dated memo at the time listing exactly what I'd said and you heard. Gummer, a.k.a. Kesteghlan, if you like, uses a special cutting tool for breaching concrete and metal. Miss Sharp must have seen the business end of a lance wrapped up in a blanket when Gummer was off to London and the next vault job. Its outline resembles a weapon."

Fresh sweat showed on Salmon's upper lip, inspiring her reluctant compassion.

He must have pressed the panic button the moment Ron Gummer's false name was exposed. Probably half Special Branch, plus assorted spooks and a detachment of SAS raiders, were on their way, thanks to him. She left an indefinably shrunken figure

reaching for the phone with the eager anticipation of somebody with snake phobia approaching an asp.

One down, one to go. She was looking forward to a chat with Superintendent Ruspe.

"You are in the wrong job, anyone that good at going over my head ought to be an Olympic pole vaulter." Top marks for style: if Ruspe was angry, he concealed it beneath mellow regret.

"Not quite with you, sir." Inspector Tierce was demure, the "sir," out of favor officially in this democratic, team-spirit era, rolling off her tongue like honey.

"That's true, at least. In your twisted mind you're way ahead of me. I knew you were pig-headed, but spiteful is an eye-opener. Operation Reassure wasn't good enough for you, and when you turned it to advantage and managed to pull out a plum, the only thing spoiling it was the idea of me arresting Gummer. So you sneaked off to the Regional Crime Squad and gave him to them. Just to put a spoke in my wheel, how petty. Disloyal isn't the word."

"Only doing what the chief constable said, sir. Force Instruction 23, dated fourth June this year—info on RCS target criminals to go to them first, copies to relevant authorities. Your copy must still be on its way."



Ruspe, steepled forefingers tapping his lower lip, looked at her for a long moment. "It was the fifth of June, that FI." Jill tingled with shock, for there was laughter in his dark eyes.

"That's right, you're fireproof. Know the system backwards, including how to use it for cheating fair. I still can't make out whether you are dead clever or dead stupid, all the same. There is such a thing as a pyrrhic victory—means you win a battle but lose the war doing it."

This might not be the time to say that she knew what the expression meant. Ruspe was correct: high on the prospect of outflanking him, she hadn't stopped to consider the cost of her coup. Thinking quickly, she countered, "I don't think you would raise the possibility if you had any intention of victimizing me. But it *was* dead stupid, I'll put my hands up to that."

"Not bad, off the top of your head. Better than fluttering your eyelashes and saying I'm too big a man to stoop to revenge. Foster no illusions about that, incidentally." He astounded her by adding, "Seeing you're not an eyelash-batter and have got a head on your shoulders, we shall say no more about it."

"End of the day, Gummer has been recaptured, and that is what the job's all about." Ruspe hadn't finished with her, though.

"Have you ever read a book called *Stalky & Co?* Rudyard Kipling, all about his schooldays, but that's just the top layer, it's a mine of wisdom on human nature."

That figured. An author notorious for branding women as a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair was bound to be Superintendent Ruspe's idol.

"There's a character in that book, a teacher, bit of a sadist and sarcastic with it. 'He's a beast,' somebody says, 'but a just beast.' That's me." Ruspe treated her to his first genuine smile. "If you had ever bothered to ask the blokes, they would have told you I am a pain and a monster—they can't spell martinet—who loves catching them out and making them sweat. Hallmark of a just man is nobody likes him. Day I risk making friends at work, I retire on the spot."

"From where you stand, I went out of my way to rob you of your bygone-case reviews, your one chance to be effective while restricted to light duties. Don't butt in, you can heckle at the end, and less of the sirs and butter-wouldn't-melt, please."

"Let's examine the plus side: A few, a very few results . . . in six or seven months. But how long has it been since you did any good, and how many investigations have you turned over since then? Plenty, to no purpose, for



the simple reason you've worked back from the recent past to the 1960's. Mission Impossible—records mislaid when we went over to computers, witnesses dead or can't remember that far back. . . .

"It hurts, admitting this, but you are an outstanding officer, potentially at any rate. Trouble is you haven't the common sense of a wet hen. Your precious niche is a dead end. And since the deputy chief thinks you're made of glass, there is no chance of getting back on the front line until you are physically fit. Officially."

The closing word alerted her.

"Never entered that needle-sharp brain of yours that I was being sneaky, edging you into action while the bosses weren't looking," Ruspe jeered.

"Of course Operation Reassure is rubbish, we both know that." Having nonplussed her anew, he went off at a tangent. "Napoleon liked lucky generals, and your luck is remarkable. Might even be strong enough to find a nugget of gold in the chief constable's heap of dross, that's what I told myself.

"Could be the famous luck would hold good in Reassure. Why not? Worth a spin, I decided. Won't happen again—not me being right, you getting that lucky that quick. The Gummer business was an anomaly, you will

hate the rest of Operation Reassure, I promise.

"By the same token, soldier on until the Old Man has another brainwave and dumps this one, and I shall make it my business to get you something better."

"I . . . I owe you an apology." In-furiatingly, she was close to tears.

Ruspe became alarmed. "Don't go girly on me at this late stage or it's back to square one with you. I need a girly to slog round schools and youth clubs, telling them Our Police Are Wonderful, so think on!"

He moved abruptly, leaning across the desk to shake hands—no, he was passing her a business card.

"This chap is Mundenham United's physio; he is not supposed to moonlight, but tell him Bill Ruspe is asking and he'll take you on. If he can't get your leg right, nobody can. My son was in a road accident, the quacks said he could forget about contact sports. Fine way to pump up a kid who's mad on soccer. That was five years back and he's been playing football for the county youth side for three of them."

Returning to her tiny office, Inspector Tierce differed with with Superintendent Ruspe yet again. He was a just man, but a beast, never.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THAT HEEL OF A SEAL

Frank Cockrell



About one A.M. a slender fellow named Joe Murphy with a kind of pointed face and bright black eyes came into the bar of the Hotel Crawford and leaned his elbows between a couple of young men in dinner clothes.

He said weren't they Benton University students, and they said they were, and he said his name was Joe Murphy. They said their names were Newt Rankin and Gilbert Fletcher. Rankin was the oval-shaped one who made his clothes look so full and solid and was quite a footballer autumns; Fletcher was the tall, angular one, and something of an intellectual though never offensive about it.

Murphy said since they were Benton students he would buy a drink.

Fletcher said, "That sounds like a weak incentive, but we quickly do accept."

Murphy said, "Oh no. You see, I'm publicity man for Janet Wallace. You know about the *Mousetrap* stuff, of course?"

They knew. "The incentive gets weaker," Fletcher said.

The *Mousetrap* was a Benton student monthly, humorous, which had beaten a path from its door to a fairly national reputation. Janet Wallace was a young lady of the cinema, built precisely to bathing suit designers' specifications and christened by publicity as the M-munnnh! girl. In the *Mousetrap's* annual list of awards, published three weeks ago, Miss Wallace had come off with not one but three: Actress with the Least M-munnnh!, Actress with the Least Animation, Actress with the Least Acting. The press of the country, encouraged by a few remarks from Miss Wallace and recalling the *Harvard Lampoon* Ann Sheridan incident, gave the situation a good deal of publicity.

"What kind of guys are the fellows that run the *Mousetrap* anyhow?" Murphy asked.

"They're a bunch of bing-headed dopes, if you ask me," Newt stated, "and it sounded like you just did," he added. He lifted his highball. "This sure goes good after all that champagne." They had just left a deb party.

"Yes," Gil confirmed. "A bit narrow and shortsighted, I would say. Why?"

"Yeah," Murphy said. "That's just what I thought. Do you know any of them?" he asked.

"Know 'em!" Gil said. He waved a hand. "Like a book, is all." He was

secretary of the Board of Editors himself and in fact had written the award column in which Miss Wallace was so prominent. "Why?" he asked, setting his empty glass down with a suggestive clink.

"Let's have another," Murphy said immediately, summoning the bartender. "You see," he explained when they had their refills, "I have an idea for revenge on those guys. Of course," he added, "I won't mislead you. There'll be some publicity in it, too. But it ought to be fun, and I thought you fellows might like to help."

"Why not?" Newt said. "What's your notion?"

"As you know," Murphy said, "Wallace is playing a personal appearance here. Well, there is a seal, name of Van Goonstruther for some reason, which is on the same bill. I thought," he explained, "that it would be a pretty fine night's work if we steal that seal and put it in the bed or the bathroom or something of the editor or whatever they call him of the *Mousetrap*. You see what I mean: RESENTFUL STUDENTS SLIP SEAL IN EDITOR'S BED. BENTON UNIVERSITY JANET WALLACE CLUB TAKES DRASTIC STEPS TO AVENGE THEIR IDOL. Et cetera. You get the idea."

He was between them, and for a moment their glances met over his head. They turned back to their drinks.

"He wants to steal a seal," Gil said.

"That's what the man said," Newt confirmed. "He wants to steal a seal." He sang softly, "He wants to steal a seal, he wants to steal a seal; heigh-ho, the merry-oh, he wants to steal a seal."

"I never stole a sole," Gil came in, "I never stole a sole; heigh-ho, the merry—" He paused. "We wouldn't have any trouble, of course," he said. "There wouldn't be any difficulty?"

"Oh no," Murphy said. "I happen to have a key to the theater, and Luke Vernon, who owns Van Goonstruther, has given me express permission to kidnap him—for fifty bucks."

"Thorough little chap, aren't you?" Gil said.

"Whose place would be good to put him in?" Murphy asked.

"Hardy Moore," Newt said. "He's president of the Board of Editors."

"Perfect!" Murphy said. "I guess we can get him out of his rooms for a while some way?"

"We don't have to worry about that at all," Gil said. "I happen to know he's out now and won't get home until much later. We've all the time we want."

He knew Moore was out because he had been with them all evening and was at the moment only across the lobby near the entrance to the Venetian Room, where he was trying to see what he could cook up

with a luscious blonde hatcheck lassie he had happened to spy. He knew Moore would be late getting home because, hatcheck girl yes or no, they were in Moore's car and the keys were in Newt Rankin's pocket.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Murphy asked, and answered quickly, "A drink, I guess," and they all had another.

"How did you ever happen to think of this?" Gil asked him respectfully.

"Nothing to it," Murphy assured him. "Have ideas like this all the time."

That was not strictly true. He had ideas like this only when drunk, though that was a considerable part of the time. The only way anyone could ever tell he was crooked was by his eyes, which grew smaller and blacker and brighter. At the moment they were like tiny sparkling jet beads.

As the three of them passed through the lobby headed for a street door, a girl with a brown felt hat pulled down over some of the softest, nicest brown hair anywhere around caught sight of them and by running managed to catch up as they got to the street.

"Joe!" she called.

Murphy stopped.

"It's pretty late," she said. "You've got a big day tomorrow."

"Oh," he said, "that's all right. Sue, I've got a great idea. Gonna steal the seal and put it in the *Mousetrap* guy's bed. Revenge by Janet Wallace Club. These fellows are gonna help. Pretty, huh?"

"Exquisite," she said. "Genius. Come on; why not turn in?"

"Are you mad?" Murphy asked. "Abandon the greatest idea of a brilliant career for a little sleep?"

The girl sighed. "All right, all right," she said wearily, and added sort of half to herself, "Life sure is full of things." Then she shrugged a trifle. "Well, let's get on with it, then. I guess I'd better come along."

"Sure," Murphy said. "Fine." The four of them walked on, down the street. "Great kid," he said to Gil and Newt. "Wonderful kid, Sue."

Gil held the door open, and she got into the back seat and he got in after her. Newt and Murphy sat in front.

"Hope you don't mind me coming along," she said.

"Delighted to have you," Gil assured her. "That's Newt Rankin driving and my name is Gilbert Fletcher."

"Yes," she said. "Isn't it?"

"Go by a fish market first," Murphy directed. "Down by the river, I guess, huh?"

Newt went by one. Then they drove to the Strand and parked in an empty street by its side entrance and got out, and sure enough Murphy did have a key to the place, and the first thing they knew they were inside and backstage, groping around with matches until finally they were in a room with some smells and swishing noises, and when Murphy turned on the lights there was Van Goonstruther, curving back and forth in his small tank. He began to bark right away when he smelled the fish Murphy had brought.

Newt said to Gil, "Hey, he's really gonna do it; the guy is gonna steal a seal."

"I believe he is," Gil admitted. "Refreshing, isn't it?"

"What do you think of him, boys?" Murphy asked. "How do you like him?"

"I don't know," Gil said. "Hasn't he got a sort of furtive look?"

"Yeah," Newt said; "he's got a shifty eye."

"Oh, that's all right," Murphy said. "Seals are different." He waved a fish at Van Goonstruther, and Van came right out of his tank. Murphy tossed it to him and backed away, waving another. Van followed briskly, barking now and then. When he barked too loudly, Murphy would give him a fish. Gil and Newt and Sue followed along behind, turning out the lights.

Sue had on a wool skirt and soft wool sweater and short socks and saddle shoes and a light topcoat; she looked almost like most of the college girls Gil knew.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked her politely.

"Oh, simply wonderful," she said, but the sarcasm was mild.

She was a rather nice-looking kid, and she had a nice calm voice.

"In general you don't care for this sort of thing?" Gil asked.

"Well, I've never done much of it," she said. "It isn't bad . . . a little smelly."

There was a spot of excitement at the door, due to a cop who was loitering on the block. But they couldn't keep Van Goonstruther in one place very long without his barking loudly, and he was getting pretty full of fish by now and wasn't as swayed by them as he had been; so they just had to risk it and hustle him across the sidewalk and into the car as quickly as they could.

The cop was looking their way, and a car came around the corner and its lights swung full on them, but the cop didn't say anything. He didn't even move. In fact, as they pulled away he was still just standing there staring at them with a fixed look. Gil looked back as they

rounded the corner, and he had just begun to run after them, waving wildly.

They were all in the front seat, Sue sitting on Gil's lap. She wasn't very heavy, and she sat on his lap as platonically as anybody ever had. It was almost like not having a girl sitting on your lap.

They had about a seven mile drive out to the university. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and asked Gil if he would like one, and put it in his mouth and held a match for him and then for her own. She was quite pretty, the way the match lighted her face.

Of course, the idea had been creeping up on him all the time, the dread notion had been simmering below the surface of his mind; but it was only right then that it pushed itself into his consciousness and Gil faced the fact that he was riding along with Janet Wallace, the M-munnnh! girl, sitting on his lap.

Sitting on his lap!

"Hey," he said. "You're Janet Wallace?"

"I'm Sue Charles," she said. "This is after business hours."

"Hey, Newt," Gil said. "This is Janet Wallace. Staggering, isn't it?"

"Perfectly amazing," Newt admitted. "And she seems right nice, too."

"I know," Gil said. "Why the hell did they change your name from Sue Charles?" he asked. "Sue Charles is a swell name."

"Why did they call me the M-munnnh! girl?" she countered.

"All right," Gil said. "Why did they?"

She shrugged. "How should I know? After a while you get fed up with asking for reasons and arguing."

"Ooo-oww!" Newt said. He said it loudly, and let go of the wheel and twisted in the seat, and the car veered to the curb, and he stopped it and leaped out.

Van Goonstruther—bored, or hurt by being left so out of things—had bitten him on the back of the neck and was now reaching for Gil.

Sue hopped off his lap and out just in time, and Joe Murphy was saved by the fact that he had slid so low in the seat that none of him stuck up in reach.

The car had one quite long door on each side through which it was easy to get into either the front or back seat. Or out. Van Goonstruther, having cleaned out the joint, now departed it, slithering out onto the sidewalk and off down the street.

"Hey," Newt kept saying, "that thing can bite!"

"We've got to get him," Sue said. "Come on! We can't let him get away."

She ran after him, and Gil ran with her. Newt brought the car.

Van Goonstruther achieved incredible speed.

It was a block and a half before they caught him. It was a suburban business block, and Van Goonstruther deployed himself in a store entrance and showed no signs of friendliness.

Sue and Gil stood a respectful distance in front of him, panting.

"Man," Gil said, "did you see him go? I certainly am learning a lot of things about seals tonight."

"Aren't we? I—I don't think I want to antagonize him."

"Don't!" Newt called. He had arrived with the car. "He bites something fierce. I'm not kidding. Let me get the car up on the walk."

It was all pretty confused. Newt got the car up in front of the store entrance, and then they put a fish in the back seat and tossed things past the ends of the car at Van Goonstruther until he was so annoyed he charged in the only direction he could—into the car.

However, they had neglected to close the door tightly on the other side in their excitement, and Van just charged right on through the car, picking up the fish on his way—and they had to do it all over again half a block on down the street.

They managed it even a second time, though, without attracting any attention and once again were under way.

Joe Murphy hadn't even twitched during the whole performance. Sue now explained that he was out; that he would be for a few hours. That was the first time Newt and Gil knew that he had been more than mildly exhilarated or inspired.

"Well," Newt said, "what are we going to do with our surly chum in the rear?"

"The original idea was to leave him for Hardy," Gil said, "and I, for one, can't think of anything better to do with him. Can you?"

"Now that you ask me," Newt said, "no. If you'll handle the details."

So they left Van Goonstruther in Hardy Moore's bathroom, a simpler achievement than it might sound offhand. Hardy had a small two room apartment on the ground floor of Melvin Hall, with an outside entrance, so all they had to do was pull the car up in front of it, open the car door, and prod Van right out into the apartment. And when Gil turned on the water in the bathtub and Van heard that, it was all over, of course. Van flapped in there and climbed into the tub almost graciously.

They shut the door and left him.

Gil gave Newt a look over Sue's head when they came out, and Newt could take a hint and said he thought if they didn't mind he'd let them go on back alone; seals always seemed to tire him, he said.

He told Sue goodnight and helped Gil drop Murphy over into the back seat, and then Gil and Sue were driving along over deserted streets to town. Gil felt incredibly good.

"What a fine night's work!" he said. "I had no idea it would be so much fun."

"I know," she said. "I didn't either."

Gil thought what the hell, he might as well be a man about it.

"Look," he said. "I have to tell you something. I'm on the *Mousetrap*. I'm the one that gave you the works. Now here I am covered with confusion and feeling pretty silly about it."

"Oh, I knew that," she said. "I saw your picture in one issue, and then you signed the piece, you know."

"Oh," Gil said hollowly. Then, after a moment: "But, gosh, how did you happen to come along tonight?"

"Well, I wanted to be sure Joe got back to the hotel," she said. "They're a little down on him for sort of losing track of things a time or two lately. He's inclined to get tight now and then and turn up absent, but he's not a bad guy and I'd hate to see him lose his job." She was silent a moment and then said, "And then, I guess I sort of wanted to see what sort of fellow would pick on somebody just because of some stupid studio publicity."

"O sins, O sins," Gil moaned, "why must you come home to roost with those long sharp claws? But damn it," he added, "how could you let them do the M-munnnh! stuff? You don't have to stand for just anything, do you?"

Sue said, "I'm very backward about arguing with people who pay me four hundred a week when I know I'm not worth it. I want to stay on hand long enough to learn a little, so maybe by the time they give me a chance to keep my clothes on and act like a genuine person I'll know how to do it."

"Sure, sure," Gil said glumly. "That's perfectly obvious, of course—now." Then he said bitterly, "Well, I guess I sure came up to expectations, all right."

"But you didn't," she said. "I thought you'd be sort of—sort of stupid and conceited, but you're not. You're—nice."

"Sure," Gil said. "Merely thoughtless. Merely the worst thing you can be in print, especially when you're printing things about people."

"Oh, forget it," she said. "It doesn't matter any more than the studio publicity. What counts is how I make people feel when they see me on the screen, and that's up to me. I guess I haven't much natural ability," she said with a sigh, "but I'll learn someday."

"You know," Gil said slowly, "I guess you will, at that. That's—how old are you?"

"Twenty."

Gil was twenty-one. After a second he said, "You're a pretty remarkable person, in case you didn't know it."

She shook her head. "I'm just pretty and happen to have a certain set of measurements and found a way I can get a lot of things I've never had or thought I might have. That's all."

"Maybe so," Gil said, "but I don't think so." He slowed down a little; they had only a block to go. When they'd gone half of it, he said, "Look. It doesn't mean anything, but I'd just like for you to believe it because it's true—I just want to be sure the record's straight. I think you're pretty swell."

He stopped by the curb a little way up from the hotel entrance.

She said, "All right. I think I will believe it, then." She was looking straight ahead. "I—thanks. It does mean something." And she added, "Don't brood about the other. I don't mind. Really."

"I do. But I think I can fix it. I guess," he added tentatively, "I guess I won't see you any more, maybe."

She thought a moment. "I'm afraid not," she said. She had arrived just in time for her appearance this night, and the next day, Saturday, was full with a luncheon and a tour of the city and a matinee and an interview on the radio and that sort of thing; and after her evening appearance she had just time to catch a train for Columbus. Her family lived there, and she would have a chance to spend two days with them.

"Well . . ." Gil said. He was looking at her, and she turned partly toward him now. "I—I had a nice time at your seal-stealing," he said.

"Yes." She smiled a little, sort of thoughtfully. "I had maybe the best time I've had in—in a long time." She was silent a second more. Then she leaned forward and put her hands behind his head and her lips on his and kissed him quite thoroughly.

Nothing like it had ever happened to him.

Newt was waiting in Hardy Moore's rooms when Gil got back, and Gil joined him, passing the time in dreamy contemplation of the night's events, particularly of the kiss.

Hardy showed up in about twenty minutes, and his reaction was everything that could be desired. After reviling them briefly for having deserted him, he went into the bathroom for a drink of water and came back out with a rush, wide-eyed, to announce that there was a seal in there.

Newt smiled at him tolerantly and shook his head a little and said to Gil, "Isn't he a wag?"

Then, when Hardy made them come look, they said, "Gee, he's a big one, isn't he?"

"Have you had him long, Hardy?"

"Tell me, Hard, do you find the pleasure of keeping a seal really worth the trouble?"

When Hardy was about to explode, they told him what had happened, and Hardy was enchanted. After that the three of them sat around about another half hour enjoying the gag, and then they all went to bed. Van Goonstruther all during this time had been most congenial and seemed well satisfied with things.

And so he seemed in the morning when Gil and Newt came across the hall from their rooms to see how he was getting on. He just stayed there in the tub, turning over and swishing a little now and then, sort of lazy and contented. At first.

Hardy wanted to know what they were going to do with him. "He's all right for a visit," Hardy said, "but I wouldn't want him to live here."

Gil said Murphy wouldn't try to use him for publicity, of course; he'd realize the gag was no good this morning. He or Vernon, Van G.'s owner, would probably call and arrange to come get him.

"Murphy may not know how to get hold of us, at that, though," Gil said. "I'll just call him now." He dialed the hotel and after a moment got Joe Murphy. "This is Gil Fletcher," he said.

"Who?"

"Gil Fletcher."

"You'll have to forgive me, pal; I'm terrible at names. What's your paper?"

"I'm not on a paper," Gil said. "I'm calling about last night. I want to know—"

"Sorry, old man, but I'm very busy right now. Call me later, will you? That's a good fellow."

"Wait a minute!" Gil said. "This is Gilbert Fletcher. You remember! Last night! I want to know what we're going to do with our sleek wet friend. After all, we—"

"Damn it!" Murphy shouted. "Will you get off the phone so I can use it? I'm a busy man in my own right, and besides that I've got a friend on my neck who says somebody stole his seal and the lousy cops can't find him and if we don't get him back the guy loses his billing—and you keep bleating about your wet friends, and I don't know them or even you. Now leave me alone!" He hung up emphatically.

Gil put the phone down slowly and after a moment raised his eyes to their expectant faces. He swallowed. "It looks," he said, "like we've sort of come into a seal."

Hardy Moore stated flatly, "I don't like that plural pronoun!"

"He drew a blank," Gil said disgustedly. "And he was either lying about Vernon or Vernon was drunk and drew a blank, too."

He tried to get hold of Sue then to see if she could straighten things out, but she wasn't in and he remembered her full schedule. They probably couldn't get hold of her all day.

"Just call the cops and tell 'em what happened and let the chips fall where they may," Hardy said. But Gil wouldn't do that. He said that might bring Sue into it, and they had done enough to her already.

"That lug calling the cops," Newt said. "If they find out we've got him, we're liable to get flung in the jug."

Gil said, "No, it'll be all right. We just keep him till dark and then let him loose in some vacant lot and phone the police anonymously where he is and everything is fixed. See?"

Hardy didn't like it much; it was his bathroom; but he finally agreed. "Another thing, Hard," Gil said. "We ought to print a retraction on that piece. She's a swell kid—really she is."

But that was no good. Hardy said the kind of publicity she got was part of her job and the *Mousetrap* piece was aimed as much at her business as at her personally and would have to stand. Hardy was president of the board, and his say was final.

Gil thought a moment. Then he said, "I'll have to resign, Hard."

Hardy said slowly, "I hate to see you do it, chum, but that's the way I see it and an editor that won't back himself up isn't an editor."

Gil said sure, he guessed so. He felt kind of low. He had been counting on making that retraction. He went across the hall and wrote her a letter. It stated what he felt really better than he could have done in print because it was for her eyes alone. At least she would know he had tried.

He had just sent it to her hotel by messenger when Hardy came banging on the door and calling to hurry up over and help him.

Newt was out for cigarettes, and Hardy was alone with Van Goonstruther. Van G. had turned on the water in the tub and wouldn't let Hardy turn it off. The tub was running over.

"When I try to turn it off, he bites me!" Hardy wailed.

"Heckle him," Gil said. "You heckle him." So Hardy stood just out of reach and pestered Van G. with a flipping towel, and Gil managed to slip past and shut off the water.

They thought they were all right then. But they just didn't know Van Goonstruther.

For a moment he merely slouched back in the tub and gave them a sort of surly, resentful inspection. Then he began to bark.

It was a very raucous, unrefined sort of bark and carried like anything.

"My heavens!" Hardy said. "We've got to stop that. People will hear it."

"I know," Gil said desperately. "I know!" He nerved himself and went into the bathroom and turned on the shower above Van G. and played it on him and splashed it over everything, and this seemed to mollify him a bit.

Newt came in, and Gil tossed him some wet bills and said to get some fish in a hurry.

"I think he's hungry."

The place was a wet shambles when Newt got back, but the fish seemed to calm Van G. and they had a short breathing spell.

Gil sighed. "I never was so sick of a seal."

He was shortly sicker. It was the worst afternoon any of them had ever spent. Gil spent it in his underwear, dripping wet. For, having found he could make Gil play with the shower simply by barking, Van Goonstruther capitalized on this knowledge freely.

Newt thought maybe he was a musical seal and wanted to play, and he borrowed a saxophone down the hall from Bud Newman, who was out at the time. But either Van G. wasn't musical or else the sax wasn't his instrument. All he did was bite at it.

Hardy's once tastefully furnished apartment gradually became a soggy mess because Van G. was all over the place by this time. Hardy just sat there watching glumly, like a man waiting for doom to strike.

It struck, too.

It arrived in the form of Bud Newman, coming along the hall with his St. Bernard, Monstro. They had the doors and windows all shut, of course, and Van Goon's barking, so far, hadn't carried far enough to cause anyone to come nosing around. But just outside the door in

the hall, Bud heard it and so did Monstro, and Bud opened the door to inquire what was going on and that was that.

This Monstro was a dog that had himself a bark. It was deep and hollow but loud, like someone whanging a bass drum in a bathroom. He took one look at Van G., who was in the living room at the time, and produced a woof that made the furniture jump.

Van G. took a deep breath and barked right back. He outdid himself. Then Monstro. Then Van G. again. Then both at once, full-throated and indiscriminately.

They grabbed Monstro and tried to get him out of the door, but he weighed two hundred and eleven and was agile, and he just leaned on them and went right on barking, and Van G. kept right on answering.

The building trembled.

Of course people gathered in a hurry then. Among them was Professor Turner Catledge, faculty resident of Melvin Hall. He was bewildered and aghast, but mostly outraged.

"Moore," he said sternly, "are you responsible for this?"

Gil said no, he was responsible; he had the seal, he said.

"And *what*, may I ask," Professor Catledge asked, "are you doing with a seal?"

Gil looked at him. "I don't know," he said helplessly. "This hasn't happened in years and years."

While the professor was still grappling with the remark and the whole weird situation, a policeman arrived.

It wasn't so very long at the police station, once they got there, but it was pretty confused.

Vernon was there, very irate, but Murphy wasn't, and while Gil would eagerly have implicated Murphy right up to Murphy's ears, he was afraid if he tried it might bring Sue into it, too.

Vernon wanted Gil jailed for ninety years, but while Gil would admit harboring a seal, he wouldn't plead guilty to having stolen him. The sergeant said if he had him, how did he get him? Gil said he didn't know. The sergeant bellowed what did he mean, he didn't know? Gil said he just couldn't understand it; one minute he was just a young man with no encumbrances, and the next minute he looked up and there he was with a seal. The sergeant pulled out a little hair and said, well, in that case, if Vernon wanted Gil convicted, he would have to prefer charges and have to appear for the trial, and Vernon said he couldn't be there but he demanded satisfaction.

The sergeant yanked out another small tuft and said how much? Vernon said fifty dollars. The sergeant said would Gil pay fifty dollars? Gil said sadly he guessed he would.

The sergeant let out a big sigh and said it was mighty irregular but to go ahead and please hurry up and get out and never let him see any of them again.

Gil came out on the street with two dollars and sixty cents to his name and nearly a month till his next allowance came, but in spite of everything he had come through without letting Sue Charles down, and that was the main thing. So, looking at the thing as a whole, he didn't feel bad at all. In fact, he felt darned good: capable and about half noble, too.

And then, as they were driving home, Newt, who had got an evening paper, suddenly grunted and said, "Hey, look!" and handed the paper to Gil.

WALLACE MELTS EDITOR
CAMPUS CRITIC CONTACTS
CUTIE AND COLLAPSES!
RESIGNS IN SHAME.

Gil's throat got tight.

There was a column, nearly, consisting mainly of his letter, with a few comments. Joe Murphy's hand was very evident.

There was more which was much more personal. Dizzy shame engulfed him, and he could neither speak to nor look at Newt or Hardy on the way home. When they got there, they had the knowing decency not to come in with him or try to talk to him.

It was a bad thing. He had resigned from a magazine that meant a lot to him; he had played patsy for that heel of a seal; he had got wet and taken a chance on pneumonia; he had smelled a friend's room up like a fishmarket; he had spent almost his last dime; he had maybe got suspended or expelled in his senior year—all for a girl that he had thought was all right and who had kissed him reeling with one kiss. And what did he get for it—what did she give him in return? She merely spread his insides out on a newspaper for a little cheap publicity.

A fine thing. A fine dame! He felt awful. He didn't try to decide whether it was because he had been an utter chump or because a kid he had thought was swell had turned out to have feet of clay clear up

beyond her shapely nation-wide knees. It didn't matter. He felt awful either way.

Having met you, I could insist truthfully that you are a more than ordinarily nice sort of person, considerably more tolerant and sensible than most of us, for instance. I offered, naturally, to assume full blame for the orginial piece in our retraction, but I couldn't arrange for it.

I resigned. I had no choice, of course, but I am sorry I could not make public amends of some sort. I ask you to believe I tried my best. . . .

He went over to the beanery for dinner late, when hardly anyone was there. Melvin Hall was empty when he got back. It was Saturday night, and everyone was out on frolic bent. Everyone but Gilbert Fletcher. Gilbert Fletcher would sit in his room alone and glad of the solitude. . . .

It became eleven o'clock.

A freshman opened the door and said, "Someone to see you. Female. Out front in a cab." The freshman rolled his eyes. "A luscious dish."

Gil stood up. He took a jacket from a chair beside him and slipped into it as he went down the hall. He took one step at a time, not letting himself think. Carefully. Not hurrying. Calm.

He stopped on the sidewalk, short of the open door of the cab. She slid over to his side and bit her lip once before she spoke.

"You see, Joe opened your letter. I just wanted to tell you. I wouldn't have let him. I won't do just—anything, you see. I didn't see it until—after."

He put his hand on the open door because his knees felt funny.

"It's all right," he managed. "You didn't have to bother." He made a little gesture with one hand. "After all," he said, "I guess I had it coming."

"No! No, you didn't. You were—your letter was—and then, about Van Goon—" She stopped. "Thanks for it," she said more softly. "Anyhow, I just wanted you to know I wouldn't do what it looked—do that—for anything."

"Oh," he said dumbly. And then: "But you—your family. You were going to see them and . . ." His voice trailed off.

She looked down at her hands. "I—I can fly," she said. "In the morning. It'll just be an hour later than the train. I—I'm sort of scared of flying—mostly. But I—wanted to be sure you believed me."

He took a deep breath. "You don't have to go right now? You—" It was very silly, having to stop and catch his breath.

"Not till morning. Not till six. The plane leaves then."

"Then—" Again he stopped. Where do you take a movie star on two sixty?

She said a bit hesitantly, "I thought if you weren't busy we could maybe go someplace. Someplace where—could we go to a—a jook joint?" She looked at him uncertainly. "Is that right? Where you can get a bottle of beer and maybe dance a little and just talk? I've never been to one," she said. "That is, a nice one."

He looked at her. She had on a sweater and skirt and saddle shoes again. She looked swell; like a coed, pretty near. But it came over him that she had never been to college and didn't know what it was like and wanted once to be with people her own age who were in college and look and act like them for an evening; and a wave of tenderness engulfed him and made him turn his head a moment as he got into the cab so she couldn't see his eyes.

"Joe's Clip Joint," he said to the driver. That's where everyone would be. He sat looking straight ahead as the car moved from the curb.

So I'm not a chump, he thought. I'm not the one I thought I was. But maybe this is worse. I shouldn't be doing this. After tonight the way tonight will be, it's going to be bad tomorrow when she's gone. Because when she's gone she'll be all gone, now and forever.

He was aware that she had said something. "What? What did you say?"

"Nothing." Then, uncertainly: "I mean, I was just thinking, would it be silly not to—eat something, maybe, that was—awfully good, because you knew, because you thought there might not ever be any more of it—later on? Would it, maybe, do you think?"

He didn't think. Or talk. He didn't have to. His arms went out and enclosed her, and he held her tight, kissing her. The car just rolled on whisperingly over the dark, smooth street.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Love a good legal mystery? Pick up William Bernhardt's latest in paperback, **Naked Justice** (Fawcett, \$6.99). Tulsa attorney Ben Kincaid isn't the most likely lawyer to be retained by the city's first black mayor when he's accused of brutally murdering his family, then fleeing the scene in a high-speed chase captured on video by the local TV stations. Ben and his tiny staff are no dream team, but he abhors the fact that Wallace Barnett, ex-football star and media darling, is being crucified by the press before he's even charged; Ben also believes that his client is innocent. Bernhardt has placed a winning hero in the thick of a plot peppered with plenty of legal detail, courtroom shenanigans, some high-wire suspense, and a twist ending.

The Chihuahuan desert in Texas bordering Mexico, home to Texana Jones and her husband Clay, is the setting for Allana Martin's **Death of a Saint Maker** (St. Martin's, \$22.95). She runs the trading post; as the only vet for miles around, he's always in demand. Disturbing things are happening, though. There's the odd couple parking their trailer in Texana's hookup, another stranger lurking about after dark, and two separate break-ins. A wealthy rancher and well-known arms dealer who hires Clay seems unusually interested in the Joneses. And Texana finds the corpse of the mysterious, gifted woodcarver in the tiny desert chapel he was restoring. Martin gives her readers the heat and beauty of the desert, the wildlife and the quiet and the night sky, the mix of peoples and cultures, politics and superstition that mark Texana's corner of the world as some-place special.

In her seventh Sam Adams mystery, author Sarah Shankman opens with a premise that places her usually breezy and irreverent

reporter-turned-author (Sam's working on a sequel to her nonfiction book titled *American Weird*) in a heart-wrenching position. She receives a letter from her mother that begs her to come immediately to Santa Fe. The shocker is that Sam was orphaned as a small girl when her parents, returning from a European vacation, both died in a plane crash. Before it's all over, Sam will learn something more about love, loss, and the sacrifices one will make to protect a child. **Digging Up Momma** (Pocket, \$22) is a satisfying jaunt down Memory Lane, with a very engaging traveling companion.

Thomas Cook's labyrinthine, lyrical suspense novels explore possibilities in contrasts, and his latest in paperback, **Evidence of Blood** (Bantam, \$6.99), is no exception. Kinley is originally from the small town of Sequoyah, Georgia—"Deliverance country" as he calls it. Raised by his grandmother in an isolated rural cabin, he found that his natural reserve and the high I.Q. that later earned him scholarships up north alienated him from his peers. He has moved very far away since then, growing into the self-possessed and successful author of true-crime bestsellers who calls Manhattan his home. Yet Kinley did have one boyhood friend, and now Ray Tindall is dead at forty-something; Ray's daughter believes the circumstances are suspicious. Tracing his dead friend's footsteps in the final days of his life takes Kinley on a path to self-discovery and, finally, on a treasure hunt that uncovers buried secrets in his own past. Cook's prose is as hypnotic as a snake charmer's tune.

Nevada Barr continues her exceptional mystery series starring Park Ranger Anna Pigeon in **Blind Descent** (Putnam, \$22.95). The setting for this entry is Lechugilla Cave, a huge, largely uncharted cavern discovered a decade ago in New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns National Park. When a friend trapped in a caving accident calls for Anna, she pushes back her claustrophobia and staunchly goes in with a rescue party. What she hadn't bargained on is that her friend's broken leg may not have been accidental at all, which means that someone may be determined to keep her from coming out alive. Barr's readers are accustomed to her details of weather and terrain, flora and fauna, and the indifferent harshness and occasional brutality of life in the wilderness. She brings the same skill to limn this underground world, off-limits and totally foreign to most of her readers, and manages to make the treacherous, gigantic, lightless, mountainous maze as beautiful and deadly as any setting in a previous book. It's a monumental task (pun intended), and Barr brings it off, using the Lechugilla Cave as the centerpiece of a story filled with

memorable characters, amazing deeds, and hair-raising action scenes. You won't be able to put it down.

Parnell Hall's latest literary cocktail is a merry mix of action and suspense, humor and zany characters, with unemployed Manhattan actor and meantime private eye Stanley Hastings at the center, definitely shaking—not stirring—things up. Stanley gets an offer he can't refuse (the pay is just too good). Find out who has been making threatening phone calls to the attractive wife of an arrogant and bestselling novelist. Our Stanley tries changing the unlisted number, staking out corner phone booths, and several other game attempts to solve the case which—as his cop friend points out—are all admirable efforts, but their success will also mean that Stanley's per diem contract ends before he sees the big bucks. Tracking down the few people who have access to the writer's unlisted phone number means meeting several memorable characters: the guy's pushy agent, the unemployed young editor who bought (and rewrote) his first book, and a greedy publicist. When they start getting bumped off, the possibilities thin. Then Stanley becomes the target, and now he's really confused. **Suspense** (Mysterious Press, \$23) is a lot of fun.

One may think of ancient Rome in terms of grandeur and power, brutality and deadly politics, wealth and slavery and imperialism. But hey, lighten up! Read Lindsey Davis's latest Marcus Didius Falco mystery titled **A Dying Light in Corduba** (Mysterious Press, \$23), and put a sense of humor back into old Rome. Falco, who once made his living as a Roman equivalent of a hired private eye, is trying to move into a respectable line of work more suitable to the lover of the highborn Helena Justina and the father of their first child. That's why he's attending a business-as-usual banquet for the Society of Olive Oil Producers of Baetica in the first place. It's only as the dinner guests begin getting beaten up and bumped off that Falco is reluctantly pulled back into his old patterns: finding out whodunit. As usual, Falco is more slippery than an eel in a vat of Baetican olive oil, and a lot more entertaining.

THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious by Virginia Thompson of able mentions go to William James Hagerty of Melbourne, Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Lynn LaDonna Lane Grigsby of Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Laura McPhee of Scottsdale, Arizona; Saralyn Romanishan of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Lynda F. Burrage of Lilliwaup, Washington; and R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Photograph contest was won Alameda, California. Honor-Kane of Yorkville, New York; Florida; James Franklin Chatman of Houston, Texas; Broken Arrow, Oklahoma; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Laura McPhee of Scottsdale, Arizona; Saralyn Romanishan of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Lynda F. Burrage of Lilliwaup, Washington; and R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Photo by Rolan Fajardo

DETECTIVE 2000 by Virginia Thompson

Cal's work was his life. Cal's ex-wife, his psychiatrist, and he had finally come to accept that.

Movie stars undergo extreme plastic surgery for their careers. When Cal heard that genetic experiments were being performed that might enhance his career, he had volunteered to let the geneticists work on him.

Now, standing in the night, waiting for a serial killer of at least twenty women, he had no regrets. Geneticists had implanted the genetic code of a tiger's eyes into Cal's genes. He could see minute details of the killer across the dark field. Cal's hearing had been magnified by implanting the ears of the fox and the hare. He could hear the man's rapid heartbeat. His keen bloodhound's nose sniffed the acrid evil aroma of the man's murderous intent.

Cal set himself. Then, on long grasshopper legs, he sprang across the fifty yards separating him from the murderer. Landing on the criminal, the force of Cal's buffalo hump shoulders drove the murderer to the ground. He wrapped his long, simian arms around the man. Finally, grasping the back of the psychopath's neck firmly in baboon jaws, Cal held him in place until his partners reached them and handcuffed the criminal.

The few law enforcement people who knew him had long forgotten Cal's name. They simply called him Detective 2000.

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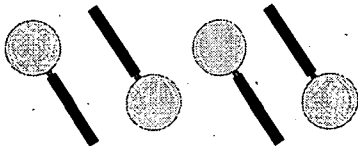
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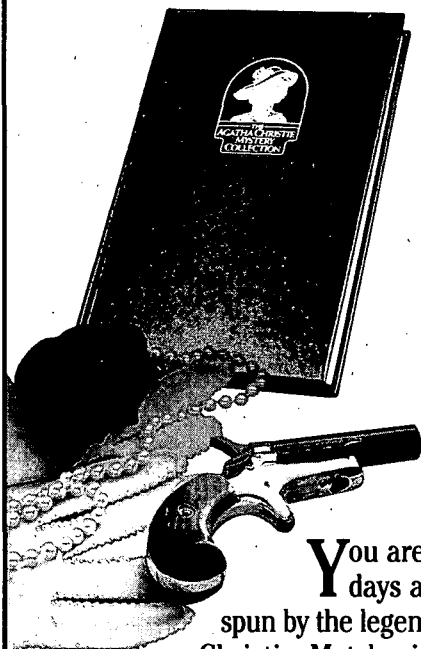
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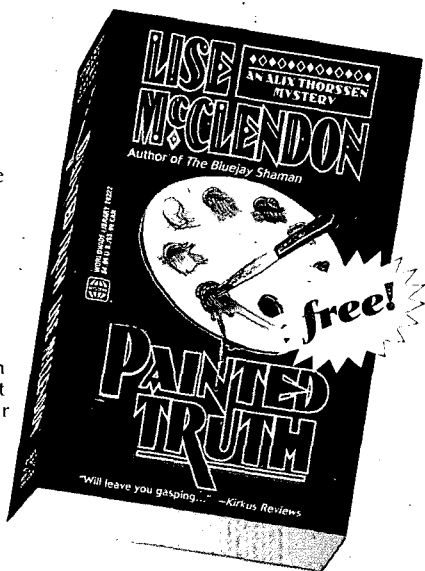
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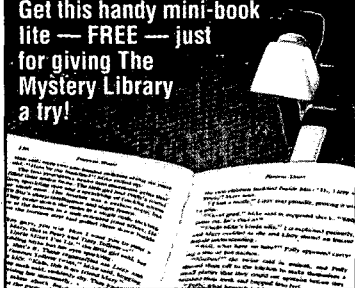
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